

Ten Months Previously

Story: Ten Months Previously

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Summary: There was nothing left to her but questions and a short note. How could she ever be satisfied with that?

Chapter 1: Chapter 1

Thanks to everyone who has taken the time to review, follow, or favorite my other stories. This one will be somewhat shorter. I'm anticipating fewer than thirty chapters, but I hope you still enjoy it all the same. The problem with fanfic is that the chapters are obviously not posted all together, which can lead to confusion while readers wait for the next chapter. So if you're confused by anything in the story, you're welcome to ask questions, but know that they will probably be answered in future chapters. In no way is this a mystery, but different timelines are scattered throughout the story, and that might be initially confusing.

This first chapter is a bit short, but the rest will be longer. Obviously, I'd really love to know what you think. Thank you, and enjoy!

"Can't sleep, either?"

The sudden noise startled her, and she jumped, swiveling around on the bench, pressing a hand over her now rapidly-pounding heart. Then she saw who it was and managed to shrug a little, turning back to look at the green lawn and trees and flower bushes, trying to get her heart to stop racing. The night was clear with an occasional breeze. It was dark, though; she couldn't see the moon anywhere.

He sat down next to her, and she glanced over again. He had some stubble, and his hair stuck out oddly on one side. It made her smile a little.

"I saw you from my window," he said, pointing back to the house. "I thought you were a ghost for a second!" He laughed softly, his voice still just barely losing the hoarseness and scratchiness, and she smiled again.

They sat in silence for a long while. Another breeze swept through, causing her to shiver and draw the small blanket closer around her shoulders. She felt self-conscious in her faded pajamas; she wasn't wearing a bra, and she kept the blanket securely over herself to cover the fact.

"Are you okay? It's kind of cold. Do you want to go inside?"

She shook her head. "Fine."

Another few minutes of silence followed. She wondered if he was unsure of what to say. They hadn't spent a lot of time alone together since it had happened. She didn't know what to say, either. Now it felt as if every conversation she knew she was going to have needed some sort of mental preparation, and she had come out here to be alone and to think. She hadn't anticipated his coming, so she wasn't ready and couldn't think of anything to say.

"Did you like dinner?" he then asked. "It's my aunt's specialty."

She nodded. "Fine."

A pause. "Good. I'll tell her." He cleared his throat, something he had been doing often for the past while.

They sat there for another minute, and then the sprinkling system came on. It didn't reach them, luckily. She didn't feel ready to go back inside. The sound of the rhythmic sprinklers was slightly soothing. It reminded her of summers as a little girl, happier times in sunshine and warmth. She watched the rotation of the sprinkler. It covered a large area of the lawn. Tomorrow the gardener would come and mow the lawn again, and then he would clean up the flowerbeds and the little garden and tend to all the other things that needed to be done. The gardener's name was Mark. She had helped him a couple times with different things. He was nice.

"I keep having these nightmares," Raoul said, his voice low and gravelly. She looked up at him quickly, staring. He didn't look at her, but his brow was furrowed and his mouth turned downward. He continued: "They're horrible. It's like...I'm thinking about it when I'm awake, and even when I'm asleep I'm thinking about it. Will we ever be able to forget?"

A breeze blew some hair into her face, and she pushed it back. "It hasn't even been two weeks," she said quietly. "It's...it'll take some time, probably."

"Yeah. That's what Dr. Vasudev keeps saying. I guess I need to keep remembering that." He looked down at her, then. "But I mean...I can't even imagine what *you're* going through."

She looked away just as quickly. "I'm fine."

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see his hand raise ever-so-slightly. It hovered over her leg, an obvious sign of hesitation. Then he took it back, not once touching her.

"You keep saying that," he said. "Are you sure you mean it?"

"I'm sure. I'm fine. I wasn't the one who almost died, anyway..."

Raoul shrugged after another moment, as if he was brushing it all off. "You went through a lot worse than me." He cleared his throat again.

She wasn't going to argue about who had had the more traumatic experience. Instead she stood, keeping the blanket around her. The grass was warm against her bare feet.

"I'm tired now. I'm going to sleep."

He stood as well, running a hand through his hair. That made it stick out even more, and he looked around them a few times before nodding and following her back to the house.

The house was breathless and silent, all occupants safely and soundly asleep. Raoul followed her to her room. It annoyed her a little, but she was silent about it.

"Well...hope you can sleep now," he said, giving her a weak smile. "Are you coming to breakfast tomorrow? I can keep something warm until you wake up if you want to sleep in."

"I'll get up." She didn't want to be any extra trouble. "See you then."

"Yeah. See you in a couple hours." He gave an awkward step forward as if he was going to hug her, and then he paused and stepped backward again and cleared his throat one more time. "Yep. Goodnight." Then he left.

The room was dark, the only noise coming from the ceiling fan as it whirled on quietly. The summer evening seemed to have settled in the house. It was hotter inside than it had been outside, and she draped the blanket over a chair before climbing back into the large, soft bed. It was too hot for the thick comforter, so she lay atop of it, staring at the wall. Tomorrow she had to go to breakfast, because she had promised. And she knew if she didn't go, Raoul would worry over her and say that she had skipped too many breakfasts, and that she needed to eat. She rolled her eyes, huffing a little. She *did* eat. She had always had a good appetite. She didn't like skipping meals...She just didn't like eating with his family.

Shutting her eyes, she tried to sleep. It was the quietest part of the night—just after late-night party-goers had gone home and right before early risers got up to exercise or go to work. It felt as if the whole world was still, yet she was lying there awake, her mind buzzing, her body exhausted. And against her will, without wanting to do so, she wondered for the thousandth time, *What was he doing now?*

An old beer bottle was smashed against the back of his head.

His vision swam, and he fell to his hands and knees, the rough, dirty pavement digging into the points of contact. If the idiots wanted to kill him, he would not stop them. Not now. However, to his annoyance, it seemed they mostly wished to vent their suppressed frustrations in a most violent way. He could feel blood oozing down his skull and onto his neck. A heavy boot kicked his rib cage, sending him toppling to the ground. He had already given them money. They had cornered him and had demanded his wallet. Laughing, he had pulled it out and had willingly handed over all the cash he had on him: four hundred dollars. The amount should have more than satisfied any common petty gang of mindless thieves. However, they appeared to be in a rather foul mood that evening and were more interested in the physical aspect of mugging a freak in a mask.

Ah, well. What was that old saying? *Misery loves company.*

Yet he was already unbelievably miserable. Nothing they could do to him could worsen his mood. Not even a knife to the back or a bullet in the gut. No pain could compare to...

There were three of them, and each took a turn. One favored his steel-toed boots. Another had a set of brass knuckles. And the third didn't seem to know what he liked best; he simply did as much damage as he could in any way possible. By the time they were finished, he was fairly certain that he had severely-bruised ribs, lips split in several places, two broken fingers, a twisted ankle, and a laceration on his side. Had he had a nose, it would have been broken as well.

Small mercies, then.

He lay there for a while, simply breathing. Blood was dripping out of his mouth, and he realized that in addition to getting his lip split, he had accidentally bitten his tongue. It was throbbing, blood dribbling down his chin as he drooled like an infant. His handgun was pressing painfully against his hip, and he could feel the weight of his lasso in his pocket. The idiots hadn't thought to search him before leaving. They hadn't even bothered to take his two-thousand dollar leather wallet. It was lying in front of him. He gave a small sigh. If only they had asked—he would have given them more. That was the sort of...*thing* he was now, apparently. A thing that gave instead of took.

In the distance, a police siren was wailing. Perhaps coming for him...He didn't move. The siren faded. The night was muggy, full of pollution and stifled summer warmth. It clung to the streets and alleyways, smothering him. He was having trouble breathing. The mask was choking him, resting at an odd angle against his mouth.

He swallowed a mouthful of blood and saliva and then coughed on it, which caused his ribs to remind him that they were damaged. Against his will, he gave a small, pathetic groan. *Pathetic.* That's what he was now. There was no denial in him about it. Everything about him was pathetic: what he had done, what he was doing, undoubtedly what he was going to do next...and *who* he was was pathetic. They were right all along. *Disgusting. Pathetic.*

A car drove past on the connecting street, swiftly and loudly, its speakers blaring. In the far distance, something screamed. A dog was barking repeatedly. It all intermingled, pressing in on him, causing his head to ache ferociously. Silence. That's what he wanted. Eternal silence. No more...no more music. No more screams. No more tears. No more begging and pleading. No more pathetic words, promises...

A while later, he heard footsteps and the soft conversation of a man and a woman.

"...and that was just so rude, what he did."

"I know, babe, but he's my best friend." The man's voice was trying to be soothing.

"I know that, but that doesn't make it okay." A pause. "Ugh. They really need to do something about the homeless people here. Look at that guy sleeping in the gutter. Gross."

"Do you think he's okay?" The voices drew a bit closer. He felt too indifferent to move or try to hide. If they came up and poked him with long sticks, he would not bat an eye. If they threw garbage or even rotten fruit, he would not have moved. Even if they took away his mask, he felt no desire to shift any part of himself.

"Is he dead?" the woman asked. A pause, and then: "No—I think he's breathing. Let's...let's go. The police will find him in the morning. It's creepy here."

"Should we call an ambulance or something?" the man said. "What if he's sick?"

"I think he's just sleeping. C'mon, let's go. This is creepy. I don't like it. I want to go home."

A few seconds of silence, and then the footsteps drew farther away and faded into nothing.

He vaguely wondered if he would care enough to get up by sunrise. It was still another hour or two away. What would happen? People would likely ignore him for the first few hours. The police would probably be called after a while. They would then find a hideous monster lying on the street, and he would be exposed, locked up, taken to some facility for the freaks of the world, locked in a cage forever to have his mind rot.

And she would see it all.

She would watch from the safety of some quaint apartment, her eyes glued to her quaint television set. It would be mentioned on the news and then reported that he had been transferred to some clinic, unable to escape and let his horridness spread over the world again. And she would breathe a sigh of relief and turn to *him*

for reassurance.

Maybe he *should* simply lie there, then, and let it all come to pass. It would help her sleep easier, be more comfortable, after all.

But he was a coward. *Pathetic*. When the faint wisps of a pink summer sunrise crept over the tall buildings, he dragged himself up, grabbed his wallet, and slunk away, limping ridiculously, dried blood down his front and on his chin. His ribs were merciless, and he sucked in a deep breath as he followed the shadows. The cut on his side, which had clotted somewhat as he had remained motionless, reopened and began to drench his shirt again. It had been years since he had been injured like this. It had been years since he had *allowed* himself to be injured like this. Perhaps it was a good reminder, and it was certainly a good distraction. He needed to nurse his physical injuries now. Everything else could be ignored for the time being. The words in his head, that ache in his worthless, rotten heart...

His latest hovel was some run-down, disgusting old motel. It stank of urine, tobacco, and alcohol, and he locked the door securely behind him, ensuring the curtains were drawn and the window latched. He had been here two days. Tomorrow he would have to find another place. It was not wise to settle or remain anywhere long.

He put his gun and lasso down on the lumpy, unused bed and went to the sink, removing the mask and spitting out the extra blood and saliva that had gathered during his short walk. The action hurt his tongue, and he winced. More blood gathered and dripped out of the corner of his mouth. Was he to sit there, then, and let the blood drip out into the drain? Or should he simply lie down and swallow it all?

Life was offering him many pretty options.

Using his good hand, he rummaged around his small bag and pulled out the few meager medical supplies he had brought. Then he wrapped his broken fingers and tended to the cut on his side. His ankle and ribs would have to heal on their own.

The room was warm, the sun slipping in through the thin curtains and making the small room stifling. He lay down on the disgusting bed, absentmindedly pressing the collar of his shirt to his mouth to stem the bleeding from his lip and tongue.

Two more days. It was an unconscious, unformed yet decided plan in his mind. Two more days.

Still time. To see her. Once more.

He laughed suddenly. And then he cried.

Chapter 2: Chapter 2

A salty omelet. A bowl of fruit. Untouched coffee and a glass of milk.

She had busied herself with an orange, trying to make herself seem occupied and thus not available for chitchat. Raoul sat beside her, and she could feel him looking at her occasionally. She could feel basically everyone at the table glancing at her, as if waiting for her to do something. Break down, maybe? Throw the orange across the room and begin to wail? Scream that her life was a waking nightmare?

The orange peel was underneath her fingernails, staining them. It was a stubborn peel, and she worked hard.

"Let me," Raoul said, trying to take it from her as he watched her struggle.

"It's fine. I can do it." She didn't relinquish her grip and continued to pry at the orange.

"Do you need a knife? I can just cut it up for you."

She tried hard not to snap as she replied shortly, "I said it's fine. Just let me do it."

She was aware that the older couple at the table was trying to pretend not to listen to their conversation. Raoul's aunt suddenly wondered aloud when Mark the gardener would come.

"He usually comes in the early morning when it's cool," she remarked, pouring herself some more coffee. "It's going to be hot by the time he gets here."

"Traffic, maybe," her husband suggested. "Or he slept through his alarm." He laughed at his own comment.

"I asked him to plant some honeysuckle on the north lawn," Raoul's aunt, Nicole, then said. "You'll love them, Christine. They're such beautiful flowers. And hummingbirds love them!"

Christine nodded. Maybe she would be able to sneak away by herself one night and watch for the little hummingbirds. That would be fun. Sort of.

"What do you two kids have planned for today?" Raoul's uncle asked. "We're planning on doing some shopping later if you want to join us."

Raoul smiled a little. "Thanks for the offer, David. But Christine usually likes to sleep after the sessions. They're kind of draining, you know."

His uncle clapped a hand to his forehead in an overly-dramatic way. "Is it Thursday already? Sorry, you two, I forgot! Good thing we'll be out of the house, then. Let us know if you need anything."

Raoul nodded. "Thanks. You guys have fun, though." He cleared his throat and coughed a little. Christine could see Nicole and David tense, watching him very closely, but when Raoul pointedly ignored them and went back to his breakfast, they followed suit.

There was a long pause, and then Nicole said in a voice that was unconvincingly-casual, "Are you two going to talk about medication at all with the doctor today?"

Christine gave up on her orange and put it beside her plate. Raoul's hands paused as well and then resumed their motion of cutting up his own omelet.

"Maybe," was all he said. Christine looked over at him. The bright morning sunlight illuminated him, and with that she could see the fading but still-present ring of bruises around his neck. He was lucky his windpipe hadn't been crushed with the amount of pressure that had been placed there. And he was lucky that he was going to make a full recovery with no serious damage to his vocal chords. That's what the doctors had said. *Lucky*. That was a word used repeatedly. *Lucky* that they had been found. *Lucky* that neither of them had been killed. *Lucky* that none of the injuries were permanent.

"Remember, Nicole, the doctor said it was only as a last resort," David said. "Right?"

A nod from Raoul. Nicole continued, sounding a little upset, "But if it helps at all, why not use it?"

Christine went back to her cold omelet. It was unappetizing, so she pushed it around her plate for a few minutes before excusing herself and thanking them for breakfast.

She washed her sticky orange hands and then pulled on some old sandals, getting ready to head out. The *sessions*. It was embarrassing. She could sense, however, that Raoul needed them. She wasn't good at talking to him about it all. Mostly she just felt a need to keep quiet and sort it all out in her head. But Raoul needed some sort of verbal affirmation of his feelings and thought processes. Was he disappointed that it wasn't from her? She wasn't a trained therapist and would have no idea what to say in reply.

They drove to the clinic quietly. The radio played in the background. Christine hoped the session wouldn't go long today.

"What do you think about what Nicole said?" Raoul suddenly said, an obvious sign that he had been thinking about the subject in the silence. "About the medication?"

Christine looked over. "I don't know," she said truthfully.

"Me neither," he admitted. They pulled into the parking lot, and Christine squinted against the hot summer sun as she got out. The waiting room, however, was cool and dim, and they sat there for ten minutes before she was called back to the familiar room. She sat in her customary chair and waited two minutes before the therapist entered. He was a middle-aged man, tall and balding, with patterned shirts and clashing ties.

"Good morning, Christine," he said kindly.

She smiled in return, and he sat across from her on the couch.

The session was no different than the other ones; she said what he wanted to hear, nodded at his points and suggestions, and agreed that she would consider extending the therapy sessions if she wasn't "in a good place" by the time their four weeks were over.

Raoul took her out for lunch afterward. She had wanted to go back to the house, but Raoul usually needed to be out for a little bit and clear his head from the session. Fewer people stared at his neck as the bruises began to fade. She had been embarrassed for him the first few times they had been out in public after. A few women had even gasped and put their hands over their mouths before pointing outright at them.

Then again, it *had* looked pretty gruesome at the beginning. Red and raw, with black, purple, and yellow bruises spread around his neck. His eyes had been bloodshot for the first few days afterward, and he hadn't been able to speak normally for a while. The injury looked just like the story it told.

But now it was all fading, and most people didn't even notice as they walked past the little outdoor cafe. She ate half a sandwich and a salad, and he had pasta. He talked to her about his aunt and uncle's upcoming trip to Hawaii.

"We could go with them, you know," he said, coughing a little and then drinking more of his water. "It's right before the semester starts. And it might be good for us to get away for a little bit. What do you think?"

"That's an idea," she said. "I'll think about it."

He smiled at her, and she saw his hand twitch and move slightly across the table, closer to her own. Then it paused, and he pulled back.

"Dr. Vasudev said that he could prescribe something if we needed it," he continued after a couple minutes. "Some things for...anxiety and, um...insomnia and stuff. If we want it. What did your doctor say?"

"I forgot to ask about it," she said honestly. "Do you want some medication? You should take some if you need it."

"No, I'm fine," he said hurriedly, going back to his plate. "Just making sure you're okay."

She watched him. "Raoul, if you feel it would help, you should—"

"I said I'm fine," he interrupted, his voice short. "Let's just forget about it, okay?"

She nodded. The drive back to the house was long and silent, and she sensed that it wasn't okay for her to say anything. Still...if Raoul needed the medication, he should get it. She just simply wasn't sure. What would the medication do, exactly? She wasn't paranoid to the point that it was a problem. Sometimes she got nervous or afraid at certain sounds, sights, smells...but that was only natural. And they would fade in time. As for insomnia, it came and went. Some nights she slept soundly. Some nights she tossed and turned for hours, staring at the ceiling fan, her mind buzzing. If only she could take half of the prescription for insomnia to cure her half-insomnia.

The house was silent when they stepped in, meaning David and Nicole had gone out as promised. She nodded at Raoul and went up to her room, grateful for the chance to be alone again. The room was pretty, done up in a nice blue with some floral decorations. It was a small guest room with a comfortable bed. Some of her things were scattered on top of the dresser, still there from her first night here, when she had basically dumped out her bag with necessities onto it, too drained physically, mentally, and emotionally to care about order and cleanliness.

She grabbed some chapstick and then went over to the bed, lying down with a sigh.

Poor Raoul. She had no idea what to do about him or how to help him. It wasn't as if she had any prior experience with these kinds of situations...and she had had no classes, no trainings or anything.

Helping Your Boyfriend Deal With Post-Traumatic Stress 101

Maybe by the end of it all she could teach her own class. Mostly it would be a class of what *not* to do...like push him to get medication and ignore the constant tension and pretend as if nothing needed to be said between them.

She was horrible at this.

After applying some chapstick, she tossed it back over to the dresser. It hit the wall instead and fell to the floor. She rolled her eyes and sank into the pillow. A muffled noise came to her, paper crinkling, and she paused, swallowing hard. For a full minute, she debated with herself. Then she huffed on another sigh and sat up.

With a trembling hand, she pulled it out from underneath her pillow. A large crumpled envelope with her name scrawled across the front. She looked at it and then pulled out the small note that was burned into her memory. It was hastily-written, small, on a piece of grubby paper—maybe on the back of a receipt or something similar. Two short lines.

For therapy, relocation, hypnosis, or whatever else you may require to help you forget. I am sorry.

The hypnotism part had made her laugh the first time she had read it, though tears were in her eyes as she had done so. He had the weirdest sense of humor, and even in this awful little note he had managed to show it. But maybe he had been serious. She had actually wondered a few times if hypnosis would work.

A quarter of a million dollars was in that envelope. She had choked counting it all the first time, unbelieving that so much money was in her hands—just given to her in a simple white envelope with a short little note, telling her to use the money to forget. He had given it to her as if it was nothing. Then again, she hadn't been unaware of his obvious wealth. Still...a quarter of a million dollars was resting beneath her pillow every night. She was supposed to use that money to buy away the memories of him.

She had considered donating it all to a charity, and she had done some half-hearted online research into some charities that were legitimate and needed the money. But then...what if that money had been earned by some crime he had committed? Could she taint a charity with that kind of money? But what was she supposed to do with it? She hadn't told anyone else about it. It just sat there on her bed, maybe waiting for a cleaning lady to find after Christine moved out of the house. It seemed like such a stupid problem. What was she supposed to do with this much money?

The envelope had shown up three days after the whole thing, resting on the bedside table one afternoon when she had come back from the police station. So that meant...he knew. Everything—where she was, where she slept, what she was doing. And yet, she couldn't feel any warning in her stomach. She could sense that he was gone and wouldn't be back. It was there because any suspicious, unmarked mail for her would have been screened or taken to the police, and any sudden increase of funds in her bank account might look suspicious as well. So it was there, just cash in an envelope and a small note.

She fingered some of the bills. They were crisp and new, and she sighed a little, shoving the whole thing back under her pillow and burying her face in the soft,

squishy thing. She could always just use the money to finish school. It wasn't as if she was well-off by any means, and with that she could pay back her few student loans and not worry about tuition and living expenses while she finished her degree. That would be the smart thing to do, that and put aside most of it in a savings account to accrue interest while she studied. Smart, sensible, safe.

Or she could do as he said and move far away. There was more than enough for that. Still...that would be hard. There was so much here. Her school, her parents' graves. And Raoul. He wouldn't want to relocate. His family and friends were here as well. He probably needed to get away for a while—go to Hawaii with his aunt and uncle, like he had suggested—but he wouldn't want to leave permanently. For all intents and purposes, it was his hometown. He had been here ever since his parents had died.

Christine lay there, listening. She could hear a television droning on somewhere in the house. Probably Raoul, watching soccer or something. A lawn mower was growling outside, and she got up to look out of the window. Mark was there.

After a moment, she slipped her sandals back on and snuck out of the back door, making sure Raoul didn't hear. It was a hot afternoon, bright, and she shaded her eyes with her hand, going down from the back patio and into the lawn. Mark saw her and waved from the riding mower, and she waved back. He was done mowing and was heading over to his trailer to put the mower away. The smell of freshly-cut grass was strong, and she inhaled it deeply.

There was a little vegetable garden off to the side, and she went over there to look. A few things were starting to ripen. A few heavy tomatoes hung down, a deep yellow just beginning to touch them. A pepper plant stood there, and a couple little herbs were there as well. A large raspberry bush grew at the end, and she went there, finding some red raspberries and picking them, hoping they wouldn't be missed.

"It needs to be cut back again. Those bushes move and grow like weeds."

She jumped and turned to see that Mark was there, smiling at her, his skin glazed slightly from sweat.

"They taste good," she said, holding a few out to him. He took them with a nod of thanks. "You should have a whole patch of raspberry bushes."

"If they ever say they want that, I'll do it," he said, leaning down to pull out a few weeds from amongst the herbs. "You could pick them all and make jam. Start a business."

The comment made her laugh. "I don't know the first thing about making jam."

"It's easy. My mom used to do it all the time. I'll show you." He smiled up at her again, his skin darkened from the sun and almost leathery. He was middle-aged, with hair that had been in the sun too much and had turned a sort of dull, ugly brown-blond. But he had nice green eyes and white teeth.

"You could be my business partner," Christine said, taking a few more raspberries from the bush. The thorns scratched her arm, and she winced a little. Still, the raspberries were worth it.

He laughed as well. "I'm terrible at business. Why do you think I do this? Being in an office all day would drive me crazy."

She giggled, gave him a few more raspberries, and followed him around the side of the house to the trailer that was hooked up to the back of his pickup truck. He handed her a small bag of fertilizer to carry, and he grabbed some small gardening tools and led the way over to a spot along the house that was lined with fresh, upturned dirt. He was here to plant the honeysuckles, and he told her what to do, how to pull the roots down from the little plants and tuck them into the warm earth. Fertilizer and a little bit of water. They worked quietly for a while.

"How are you doing?" Mark then asked.

Christine shrugged. "Fine."

"It's Thursday." He didn't glance at her as they worked, and that made it easier for her to speak.

"Yeah. It was fine. I just...said some stuff. I dunno. I never know what to say. It's so weird, y'know? I've never done this before. I mean...after my dad died, they kept wanting me to do therapy, but I didn't want to. And now...yeah. It's just weird."

"My ex-wife and I did some couple's therapy before our divorce," he said in reply. "I didn't like it. I guess it was good for her...She said some stuff she'd always wanted to say. But I never felt like it helped. I guess it didn't in the long run, because obviously we're not married anymore." He was able to chuckle a little, and Christine gave a sad smile.

"How long will it take for these to grow?" she said, pushing some hair behind her ears. She could feel some dirt clinging to her cheek from her fingers as she did so.

"It'll take a couple weeks, at least," he said. "I don't know why they're having me plant them so late in the year. I told her they'll barely be blooming before the first frost comes in, and then the frost will kill them all. But she insisted. So here we are."

"We'll just have to believe in them," she said, half-joking, half-serious, giving the closest plant a little pat. "They'll be strong enough to survive if they try hard and we believe."

Mark laughed at that. "Then we'll try. Who knows? Sometimes they *are* strong enough and will be okay."

She asked about his two kids, and he was just telling her how his eight year-old daughter had placed in a little local swimming competition when Raoul came around the corner.

"There you are!" he said. "I was looking everywhere."

"Oh. Sorry," she said.

"It's not a big deal, I was just worried for a couple minutes," Raoul said. "Are you ready for dinner? David and Nicole are back. They brought some take-out."

"Okay." She gave the plant she had been working on one more little pat, and then she stood and brushed her dirty hands against her shorts.

"Do you want something as well, Mark?" Raoul then asked, clearing his throat afterward.

Mark shook his head. "I need to go after finishing these. It'll only take another five minutes. Thank you, though. And thanks for your help, Christine."

She waved goodbye to him, feeling a little sad as she walked away from the baby flowers.

"We might as well just pay *you* to be the gardner!" Raoul said, laughing as they walked. "You're always out helping him."

"He's nice," Christine said, wiping some more dirt from her hands onto her shorts. "And it feels good to be out doing something instead of just sitting around."

Raoul paused. "Do you want to do stuff? I'm sorry—I thought that maybe it would be good to just relax and rest, but if you want to be out, I can—"

"No, Raoul," she interrupted him. "I didn't mean it like that. I just meant...I don't want to be *out*, but it's nice to be outside a little bit. You know? And helping someone. Besides, I'm learning a lot about gardening. I didn't know anything before."

He gave a smile, though he still looked a little worried. "If you ever want to go do something specific or just...get out of the house, let me know, okay? I don't want you to feel cooped up here."

"I like it here," she said as he opened the back door for her. "It's nice of you to let me stay here. I really had no idea...where to go, you know. So thank you. Again."

He waved her thanks aside. "It's the least we can do. And we like having you here...I mean, *I* like having you here, obviously." He looked handsome standing there, with the summer sun coming in through the back door. His blond hair gleamed, and his blue eyes were looking at her seriously.

She smiled again after a slight pause, unsure of what else to do. "Thanks."

"Dinner?" he then reminded her, pointing toward the dining room, and she nodded, blushing just a little as she remembered the dirt on her shorts, underneath her fingernails, and on her face.

"Yeah. Be there in a minute."

She ducked into the bathroom that was nearby and washed off the dirt, staring at herself in the mirror. It had been a while since she had really looked. There were no obvious changes; she didn't look skinnier or heavier. She didn't have bags underneath her eyes. And yet...she still felt that she looked different somehow. It wasn't a good change, and yet somehow it wasn't a bad one, either. She scoffed and shook her head, putting some water onto her cheek to wipe off the dirt. No need to wax philosophical. Obviously she was different. Things had happened that she would never forget, no matter how much money he gave her.

And no matter how much he had wanted to control, he would never be able to control this aspect of their lives.

Chapter 3: Chapter 3

Fourteen Months Previously

There she was. He could see her, and he took her in, her pale blonde hair, her blue eyes, her pink lips and cheeks. She always blushed during this, and he found it irresistible. Who wouldn't be drawn in?

And then...that was the danger, wasn't it? No matter how stupid others might be, not every man would be idiotic enough to pass up *this*. The worry, *fear*, was constantly there. Another would see, another would find, and another would take.

"Hey, guys," she said, her voice wavering a little. She glanced up toward the camera and blushed again. "*Here's a song my mom taught me when I was really little. Yeah. Hope you like it.*" She reached down and picked up a guitar, giving it a few strums before clearing her throat and beginning to sing.

He leaned back a little, allowing his eyes to slip close. The voice echoed in and around his mind, making him forget everything else. He forgot where he was. He forgot his plans for the next evening. He forgot his headache. He forgot who he was. He forgot the mask.

Two minutes later, it was over. He opened his eyes again to watch her brush a few curls out of her face and smile again at the camera, the blush still there.

"Uh...so there you go. Bye!" The video ended. He clicked replay, and this time he watched *her*. Her fingers moved over the basic guitar chords with ease, and the lyrics came to her easily. Her little fingertips turned pink from the pressure. A simple, childish folk song. After a few measures, her eyes drifted closed, and her face relaxed into a peaceful, joyful expression. He thought he would die. The curls fell into her eyes near the end, blonde and shining.

As he listened a third time, he checked the view count. 6 views. Then again, she had only posted it a few hours ago. Curious, he looked at the video from two weeks ago. 49 views. Many of them from him. Who else watched her? Perhaps peers from her university. Her friends. Family members. But that was unlikely. She had written several times about her lack of family.

The video was over, and he switched back to the other tab, scanning over a few lines she had written.

I keep feeling that music is the way I need to go with my life, but it's so impractical. I finally decided to declare Social Work as my major, though. Maybe I'll just get a music minor or something. I mean, at least with social work I could help kids and their parents. I think I'd like that. Maybe?

He grimaced a little and closed the laptop, as if offended at what he had just read. *Social work*. What a useless endeavor. What a waste of time and talent. But then, what was he to do about it? At least he had *this*. And it was all over again. Now he would have to wait. In two weeks he would be in Ankara, where the information he had received pointed him. And she would still be there. Sitting in her cheap, plain room, uploading videos. Miles away. Worlds away.

After another moment, he picked up the laptop and put it back into the bag, her voice and soft smile lingering in his mind. It felt cleansing after the horrors of the night. He could smell blood on his coat, and he pulled it off and tossed it aside. Slowly, he removed the mask as well, the mild night air slightly stinging the exposed skin.

The headache was coming back. The rain had stopped, and he sat there in Tirana, his mind four thousand miles away.

Christine Daae.

Present Day

Tuesday morning arrived. Christine wondered if she could pretend to be sick and stay in her room, but then she thought that that would probably freak Raoul out, and he'd drag her to a hospital. That would be even worse. So instead she got out of bed, pulled on some clothes, and glumly waited for ten o' clock. Breakfast was a quiet affair. Raoul's aunt and uncle had gone out early, and so the two of them ate cold cereal and toast.

"I guess we can just use this breakfast to prepare for next semester, right?" he said, trying to joke.

She smiled. "Yeah. Guess so."

"You're all registered for classes, right? Are you nervous?"

She shrugged. "It's my third year. There's nothing really to be nervous about anymore."

Raoul's lips tightened a little. "That's true. It'll just be different, you know...after all this."

"Everything is different now," she said simply, pouring herself some more cereal. It left a sugary coating in her mouth, and she remembered early mornings with her father. He had always been a bad cook, so breakfasts had usually been cold cereal when she had been a young girl. So much cereal.

Thirty minutes later, they were pulling into the parking lot of the counseling center. Raoul hadn't mentioned medication to her once during the past few days. She still didn't know how she felt about the whole thing.

Her therapist was wearing a green checkered shirt with a light purple tie. She wondered if he did it on purpose. There was a wedding ring on his finger, too. Did his wife pick his outfits out for him? Or did she just remain silent about it all?

"Do you ever feel like a change of scenery could help you?" he was saying, watching her closely. "Some new experiences, new sights...Something fresh to think about other than what happened to you those weeks ago."

"Raoul's aunt and uncle invited us on their trip to Hawaii," she said, slightly suspicious. "We might go with them."

"That would be fun for you," he replied swiftly, looking firm in his idea. "You should go. It will help take your mind off of it all. And Hawaii is beautiful."

"Yeah," she said vaguely, more firmly convinced that *someone* had told him of David and Nicole's upcoming trip.

"Maybe you could start up your blog again," he pressed after a minute, and she looked up at him quickly, her heart beginning to pound. He continued, his voice

unconvincingly-nonchalant: "You know—post some pictures, write about your experiences. It can all be very therapeutic."

For a fleeting second, she was tempted to yell. To rage and storm and scream at him. Instead she shrugged. "That's an idea. We'll see."

"These feelings need to be expressed somehow," he said. "If you feel like you can't talk to me or Raoul about how such abuse affected you, at least you can express them anonymously online."

Anonymously online. The phrase made her stomach twist.

"Ha," she said weakly. To her horror, a burning made its way up from her chest to her throat, and her eyes stung. Trying to act casual, she stood, saying quietly, "I have to use the bathroom. I'll be back in a minute."

Forcing herself to walk slowly, she left the room, turned down the hall, and pushed her way into the bathroom, locking the door behind her and switching on the light.

With one glance in the mirror, she gave a choking gasp and began to cry, trying to keep herself quiet. For several long minutes, she stood in front of the sink and sobbed, wiping at her tears. The breakdown embarrassed her and made her ashamed, which led to more tears. And she was hungry again.

Anonymously online. She gasped on another sob, refusing to let herself think of it. What a stupid therapist! She hated him and his ugly ties. She felt like she hated so much at this moment.

A knock on the door came sometime later, and she quickly wiped at her face and cleared her throat.

"Yeah?" she said, not letting her voice crack.

"Christine? It's me." A small cough. It was Raoul. "Are you...? Um, do you want to go home?"

He knew she was crying, which meant the therapist knew and had told him. Christine felt herself burning with embarrassment. A breakdown in the middle of one of those stupid sessions...Would the therapist see it as a breakthrough? Or was it a regression?

Making sure her face was dry (even if it wasn't clear), she opened the door to find Raoul there, his brows knitted in worry.

"Hey," he said, looking hesitant. "You want to...go?"

She nodded quickly. "Sorry. Just...tired, I think. I need some sleep."

"Me too." He smiled weakly at her, and she knew his comment was supposed to help her feel less embarrassed, but it didn't. She followed him down the hall and out the front doors, keeping her face pointed at the ground so the office workers and other patients sitting in the waiting room wouldn't be able to see.

The drive back was silent, and she could tell he kept looking over at her.

"I'm okay," she suddenly said, loudly. She blushed and continued, this time her voice quieter: "I really am. It was just...a bad moment. And I'm tired."

"Yeah. It's okay, you know? To...have those moments. It's all part of the process, right?"

Process. Like it was all some big process. She had to check it all off the list. *Be stalked.* Check. *Be manipulated.* Check. *Be threatened.* Check. *Have a breakdown.* Check. *Go to therapy.* Check. *Feel better.*

"Right."

They drove into the gated neighborhood, lush and perfect. Christine looked around at the huge homes, watching the stillness. It was a hot summer day. Most people were probably indoors or out back in their swimming pools. Raoul's aunt and uncle didn't have a swimming pool, just a hot tub. She hadn't ever been in it, and she never wanted to.

David and Nicole were well-off. That much was obvious. Raoul had told her that David was the CFO of a successful international accounting firm, and because David was getting closer to his required years of retirement, he was starting to leave more and more to the man he was training to replace him, meaning David was only required to go to the office a few times a week. Nicole had worked at some editorial magazine for a number of years, editing and putting together articles, but now she ran local book clubs and small-scale charitable societies and other...rich lady things like that. But it was clear that they were enjoying their worked-for wealth and success, and Christine couldn't really blame them for it. And she was...rich now. Thanks to *him*.

Raoul's parents had been extremely wealthy as well. She knew that most of their money was being managed by Raoul's older brother, Philippe, who still lived in France, where Raoul had been born. She glanced over at Raoul as he pulled into the driveway.

"Have you heard from your brother lately?" she asked softly.

He looked over, obviously surprised by the question. Then he said, "Well...not really. Not since...that day."

"You should call him," she said, climbing out of the car and into the stifling heat. "I'll bet he'd like to hear from you. Hear how you're doing."

"Maybe," Raoul said. Christine felt a little bad for bringing it up, but somehow it seemed important now. Before, Raoul had just mentioned that he had an older brother in France, saying simply, "I don't know him that well. He's almost twenty years older than me, so he was old enough to stay in Paris when my parents died. I've only seen him a couple times since." And she hadn't thought to press the issue. But...because of the whole incident, it felt important to her that Raoul establish good relations with his family. He had two sisters, even, and Christine knew that Raoul hadn't seen either of them in years as well.

"Would he ever go to Hawaii with you guys?" she pressed, following him into the house. "Did you ever invite him?"

Raoul shrugged, looking a little uncomfortable. "I don't know. David and Nicole don't know him that well anymore, not since my parents' accident. And he's really busy, too, managing the company, you know...He probably doesn't get a lot of time off." He looked at her then. "Why? Do you want him to come with us or something? You've never even really met him."

"I know," she said quickly. "I just...never mind."

"Maybe we can have a video chat with him over the holidays or something," Raoul said, his tone making it clear that he had the final say and that the conversation about Philippe was over. "Then you can talk to him if you really want."

"Yeah," she murmured. "Sounds good." He gave her one more questioning glance, but she left before he could ask anything else, saying, "I'm going to go sleep for a couple hours. I'm really tired."

She walked through the house again, not noticing the now-familiar paintings, pictures, mirrors, and other things that decorated the walls. It was such a nice house. They had a cleaning lady come every day, though Christine had asked for her room to be left alone. Nicole had agreed, even though she had been obviously confused.

There were...private things in there. Obviously. Things Christine didn't want anyone to see. She shut the door securely behind her and went over to the dresser, pulling out the top drawer and looking. There were a few a small postcard-like pictures of paintings, and she flipped through them, a lump forming in her throat.

You seem to favor Friedrich, my darling. But that is an excellent choice. I have always known that you cherished Romanticism at heart.

Christine looked at her favorite one, that of a woman standing before the setting sun. She had always wondered what the woman was thinking of, what she could be doing watching the sunset. Perhaps contemplating her own struggles, her own trials in life.

And then there was a beautiful dark-red silk scarf that felt like water against her skin. She buried her face in it, wishing that the scent would make the memories more vivid. But they were dull, blurred, worn away by fifteen years of other experiences. Another memory came, though, one that she didn't want to associate with the scarf that had once belonged to her mother.

Red does not suit you in the slightest, my dear girl. No—I do not mean it to insult you. I simply wanted to say that I love you all the more in it.

There was a picture of New York City, a picture of her as a child with her parents, and a beautiful silver bracelet that she had worn nearly every day while in New York. She slipped it on again, the weight familiar. And her guitar was propped up against the dresser, the case battered and covered in old, faded stickers. She hadn't touched it in months, now. But the thought of anyone else touching these things...even *seeing* them...It felt like an invasion of her deepest thoughts, fears, and questions.

She tucked everything away neatly into the drawer and slid it shut softly, taking a deep breath. The turmoil from the session earlier had calmed, and she went to lay on the bed, putting a hand underneath the pillow to rest on the envelope. It was familiar, and she resisted the urge to pull it out and read the note for the thousandth time.

The day was warm, though the air conditioning kept the house cool, and she dozed for a while, finally waking to the sound of David and Nicole's return. They spoke with Raoul for a long time, their voices an indistinguishable murmur, and Christine wondered when she would feel the least awkward to go downstairs to join them for dinner.

Although Raoul had never admitted it, Christine knew that David and Nicole were like his parents. When they had been children, Raoul had even called Nicole "*maman*" on accident several times. The first time he had done so, he had cried afterward, and Christine, having lost her own mother at a young age, had sat with him and clumsily patted his back as he did so.

She wondered what David and Nicole said to him when she wasn't there. Did they give him any advice? Did they ask probing questions? There had to be *some* questions...One day he was fine, and the next he had been found nearly strangled to death in a basement with her. They hadn't asked her many questions after those first initial days, though she had a suspicion that it was only because Raoul had told them not to. Even though she felt like they still didn't understand fully and probably deserved a little more explanation as to why their nephew and his recent girlfriend had shown up at their doorstep for the remainder of the summer, Christine was grateful that they didn't ask. She still had so many unanswered questions herself.

Why? Why? Why?

And she couldn't answer any of them herself. That was the maddening thing about it all.

Nothing had been answered during those hours after, during the days, and now the *weeks*. She had a bad feeling that no answers would come in the upcoming months. The only person who could answer all the questions was...*him*. And he was gone. She had no idea where, and it wasn't as if she could just write an email or letter and send it off...

Anonymously online. The phrase came back to her, and she choked on it. That would never happen again. Even if *he* were to see it...No. She wasn't even sure she wanted him to see it.

"What am I even thinking?" she suddenly whispered to herself, squeezing her eyes shut tightly.

Was she crazy for even *considering* contacting him again? Hadn't it all been enough? So many questions...and she wanted them answered. And she wanted *him* to answer them. But she couldn't see him again. It was too much and too dangerous. She only had to think of Raoul lying there, limp and struggling for breath, his neck bright red and raw.

She could see the injury fading over the next few days, almost as though everything physical from the whole thing was disappearing. She couldn't help herself and didn't know why, but once she had rushed up to her room, shutting the door and yanking open the drawer, intent on proving to herself that it *had* all been real and that it *had* happened. She looked through the pictures, the things...She read the note and peered inside the envelope stuffed with cash.

Two days later, as they were driving back from their sessions, Raoul looked at her and said, "Hey, tomorrow morning I'm heading down to look at an apartment I'm thinking of renting. It's closer to Morningside Park, and my classes are mostly around there...Anyway, do you want to come? We could make a day trip out of it...do something fun...I could show you around campus for a while or something."

She agreed after a moment, mostly because she had no viable excuse at the time. However, the next morning, Raoul had softly shaken her awake. She was sleepily-surprised that he had come into her room at all, and she gave a little groan to indicate that she was awake.

Raoul whispered, "I'm leaving soon. You still coming?"

Christine kept her eyes shut and shook her head. "I don't feel well," she murmured. "Sorry."

There was a pause, and he cleared his throat. "Do you need to go to the hospital?"

She resisted scrunching up her face in irritation. "No. I'm fine. Just tired and a little sick."

"Okay." She felt him step away from the bed. "Hope you feel better. I'll be back late afternoon, I think. Um, just call if you need anything, okay?"

"Kay," she grunted, and she heard the door click shut. She did feel bad, but she was too tired to dwell on it for long, and so she slipped back into sleep for several more blissful hours.

When she woke, the room was bright, hot, and stuffy, and she gave a sigh into the pillow, guilt already flooding her for bailing on Raoul's planned trip. It wasn't too far to Columbia—only an hour or so, and she was sure that he had had something nice planned for her. Still, she really hadn't felt up to going and had only agreed initially to push away the guilt until the last minute. And it probably felt worse now than if she had just told him straight away that she didn't want to go.

Annoyed with these thoughts, she rolled out of bed and opened the window, a hot breeze immediately rushing through. She paused for a moment, listening. The house was still, and she felt her stomach jump in something like childlike excitement. Alone in the house...at last.

After dressing and rummaging through the kitchen for a very late breakfast, she wandered through the rooms, all familiar by now. She didn't touch very much. Everything was undoubtedly very expensive. But...she had been surrounded by expensive things all summer. *He* had been richer than this. It nearly made her dizzy to think that, but it was true. He had wanted to give her everything.

I would like nothing better than to drape you in all the exquisite things of the world. You are a queen here. Anything you wish shall be yours.

And that only all confused her more. A word had been tossed around by the therapist several times during their sessions. *Abuse*. That *he* had *abused* her. How could he have abused her when he had treated her like that?

She stepped out onto the warm back porch, confused. Always confused. It felt unreal. Christine had never imagined that such a thing would happen to her, not with her childhood and...well, life. But now it was true. She had been abused. That's what the therapist had told her, anyway.

He had never hit her. And yet...there had been times...he had approached the line. He had touched the line. And he had *almost* crossed it. So was that abuse, then? Had he actually physically abused her? He had been rough several times; he had grabbed her arms tightly, had shaken her a few times...especially during that horrible day when...she had taken off his mask. But he had never struck her or done anything of that nature. Had he *sexually* abused her? Christine shivered. He had never touched her inappropriately. Had he wanted her? Yes. She knew that for a fact. He had even admitted it. But he had never acted on his desires.

So...that left a weird, blurry gray area. She had been abused...taken advantage of. Manipulated. But in the weirdest ways—ways that maybe she had wanted...

Christine rubbed her eyes, wishing that her mind would stop racing, stop spinning. It was full of questions, grief, *anger*, answers, fears, uncertainties...longings...

She felt like something with too much pressure building inside. One day she would burst, unable to process or really comprehend everything.

The blog had initially begun as a way to help her deal with all the mixed feelings she had had while dealing with her father's death and studying at her university. Now her problems felt much more complex...but back then, it had been a means of expressing herself in a way that felt like she was telling them to some kind of invisible, ever-listening friend. Writing everything out had forced her to actually put words to the things that had troubled her: a few disastrous dates, struggling in a couple of classes, uncertainty over declaring a major. There were larger topics as well that she had been able to reflect on: her loneliness, her feelings of isolation and the fact that she didn't have very many close friends, her love of music...

She had never really expected her blog to attract any major attention, and it hadn't. There were millions of little blogs by millions of girls from all over the world, and she had never made any effort to promote it or draw attention to it in any way. It was her invisible, all-visible diary of her heart. Maybe deep in her subconscious she had started the blog instead of just a paper diary because she had hoped someone would read and understand and reach out to her in comfort.

And then someone had, and her whole world had changed.

But if she were to return to it, like the therapist had said to do, what would she say? How would she even start? Everything she wanted to say...she wanted to say to *him*. But she was afraid of posting anything, lest *he* should see it at all.

After a few more minutes of thinking, Christine turned around and went to the computer station, grabbing a piece of blank paper out of the printer and a pen that was sitting nearby. Her heart started to beat faster, and she took a deep breath.

No one else would see the letter. Only she would.

And for some reason, the thought terrified her.

Chapter 4: Chapter 4

Thank you very much for the favorites, follows, and especially reviews. It's always good to hear feedback and suggestions.

Sitting down with a glass of water, Christine shook her head and rubbed her neck. Then she picked up the pen. It was time. *Just get it over with.* If this didn't help her feel better, then who knew what would. This was sort of what the therapist had recommended, right?

Dear Erik

She paused and then smiled wryly. *Dear.* It had been automatic, like it always was in starting a letter. *My dear.* His term of affection for her. That phrase was ingrained in her memory, the way he said it, how he said it, the tone and inflection of his voice. *My dear.* She crossed out the words and tried again.

Erik

I don't know what to write. This is weird. I'm sitting here at the kitchen table. It's two-thirty now. I'm alone in the house. It's a nice house.

She put the end of the pen in her mouth, staring out of the windows. It was so beautiful outside. The summer was intoxicating, enticing. It wasn't fair that it had been the hardest, worst summer of her life.

You did a lot of stuff to me. She crossed that out. *You did a lot of stuff for me. So thank you for that. I never would've found my voice without you. I'll never forget that show in New York. It was seriously one of the happiest moments of my life. I'd never felt so amazing. And I was happy you were there with me. I still am happy you were there with me.*

Christine paused for a moment, letting her eyes drift close as she remembered that evening. Everything had been perfect...the dress, the shoes, her hair, the party, the audience, her voice...Erik. If only there was a way to make sure that all the little details of memories weren't forgotten...That would have been one of the memories she would've kept perfectly-preserved.

You hurt me a lot, you know? And scared me. That night...I'll never forget that night, either. It's so weird how different those two nights are. You were so different. I can't believe you, Erik. How can you be so extreme? That night in New York with the show, I really thought I...

She paused, swallowing harshly, keeping the pen on the paper.

"No one will see it," she murmured vaguely. "It's just for me." So she continued.

I really thought that I could love you. That I did love you. But then everything got ruined. And I saw so many sides of you. And I got so scared. I felt like you wouldn't even listen to me and you didn't care. It just got so out of control so fast. And then that night. The stuff you did to me was worse than anything before. And what you did to Raoul just makes me realize...

She thought for a few long moments and continued,

And what you did to Raoul just makes me realize how scared and hurt you actually are. I'm so sorry for whatever happened in your past, Erik. I have literally no idea. I feel like you've been hurt over and over and over. And I'm just going to be part of a list of people who've hurt you and betrayed you. It feels so awful. I feel awful.

But that kiss...

Another long pause. Christine felt some tears creep into her eyes, and they dripped onto her hand as she wrote.

But that kiss was not meant to betray you or hurt you. It was just...real. For me. I just wanted you to feel better and not feel like I was going to hurt you again. I think about it all the time. You never told me what it meant to you, but I could see it in your eyes. I think you wanted to believe it was real, but you wouldn't let yourself. So that's why I kissed you again. It was like an answer, y'know? Like to say, "Yeah, it's real, and I'm kissing you. And it's okay, Erik. We're okay."

A door opened and closed, and she jumped, grabbing the paper and hastily stuffing it into the pocket of her shorts. She could hear Nicole laughing as David said something, and Christine looked around, wondering if she could escape. However, if she left the room she would run into them. But if she stayed, they would undoubtedly find her. So she sat there awkwardly, glad she had a glass of water as some kind of excuse.

Nicole came in and exclaimed when she saw her.

"Christine! I didn't know you were here. Raoul's car is gone."

"He went to look at another apartment," Christine said, clutching the glass of water tightly. "One that's closer to campus. I didn't feel like going. I was just...uh, tired for a while."

"Well that's fine, sweetheart!" Nicole set her large yellow purse down on the table and took the chair next to hers. Christine tried not to be annoyed and forced herself to sit there and smile. When had she stopped being friendly? This woman and her husband were housing her without getting a cent. They were paying for her living expenses, and they had never once asked anything in return.

"It's such a nice day outside!" Nicole said, grabbing a banana from the bowl of fruit on the table. "I went to the park with some of my friends, and we had a little picnic. I would've invited you if I had known you were here!"

"That's fine," Christine said hurriedly.

"Yes, well. I just assumed you'd be with Raoul. It's good you two are helping each other, you know? Poor boy. Life just won't cut him a break, will it?"

Christine nodded vaguely but didn't reply. Life didn't really cut her a break, either, it seemed.

"So have you given any more thought about coming with us to Hawaii?" Nicole continued. "You two would love it. We try to go every year. It's very beautiful. And David knows a guy who has a little house right on the beach. We always stay there. And it's so romantic, too..." Nicole looked at her and winked a little. "Of

course, we could always get you and Raoul a private beach house."

Christine blushed and tried to laugh. "Heh. Yeah..."

"It'll be just the thing you two need, I'm sure," Nicole said. "I know things have been kind of tense between you two, obviously because of that whole...awful thing. But a little romantic getaway could patch everything up and help you two move on. Don't you think so?"

Christine desperately wanted her to stop pressing the issue, but she tried to be polite. "Yeah. It's a good idea. I'll have to think about it."

"I know Raoul would love it," Nicole said with another wink. "He's head over heels about you. Crazy about you. I can see it."

She shifted in the chair, and she heard the paper crinkle a little in her pocket. Nicole was still waiting for an answer—a confirmation, probably, judging by her expression and tone. Christine used one of her last-resort excuses:

"I couldn't impose. I mean, a plane ticket, food, accommodation...Really, that's too much to spend on me."

Nicole's perfectly-shaped brows furrowed instantly, but in a somehow gentle, joking way. "Christine," she said shortly. "I forbid you to think about it like that. You are more than welcome to come. We want you to come. And obviously *Raoul* wants you to come. You know he's like my own son, and I want him to be happy more than anything. If this is the only thing I can do to help you two move on and start a future together, I'll buy you a thousand trips to Hawaii."

Nicole laughed, and Christine tried to do so as well. *Start a future together*. The phrase made her uncomfortable. Not that she didn't care about Raoul...but it hadn't even been a whole month since the whole...thing. She wasn't exactly ready to start planning a wedding or talking about the number of kids they would have.

And yet...they had been practically engaged just two months ago, hadn't they? Christine had been too afraid to make it official, but they had secretly whispered about their future together during their stolen dates and times alone. She could clearly remember it. Once they had bought two packages of her favorite shortbread cookies and had just gone to the park, talking and laughing and discussing possible wedding dates.

"Maybe between semesters," Raoul had suggested, eating two cookies at once and spilling crumbs all over his lap. "A Christmas wedding."

"Too stressful!" Christine had replied, though part of her was a little charmed by the idea of a winter wedding—with lots of red and gold and dark green and holly everywhere...Still, they needed to be practical about their imaginary, half-serious upcoming wedding. "Let's get married next spring."

"A whole year away?" he had said. "That's too long! I guess we'll just have to get married this summer."

"Guess so!"

They had laughed and had made themselves sick from all the shortbread cookies. And it had been a rare moment where Christine felt at peace, protected, safe...That is, until two days later when *he* had found out and had threatened to lock her up if she did it again. She had not taken the threat seriously until it had been too late.

Then there had been *that day*...And they had planned to get married. She had wanted to marry him. But then everything was ruined.

Nicole was still waiting for an answer.

A trip to Hawaii...She had always wanted to go there, yet she had pictured it under happier circumstances. But she shouldn't be so ungrateful. They were offering her a free plane ticket! What was wrong with her? Still, what if she accepted the trip and things between her and Raoul got even more strained? A wasted trip, they would probably think. A waste of money. Or...what if the trip actually did bring them closer together? Her stomach jumped nervously at the thought. To be that close to him again...It was kind of scary. She had liked it before, but so much had changed in such a short amount of time.

After another pause, she took a drink of water and then said, "Well...okay. I'll come. Thank you so much."

Nicole gave a happy little squeal and leaned over to give her a hug. Her perfume was strong, and Christine awkwardly patted her back a little, unsure of what else to do.

"Oh, hooray! We're so happy," Nicole smiled. "I'm sure Raoul will be so happy. I can't wait to tell him tonight! Did he say when he'd be back?"

Christine shrugged. "He's been gone since this morning. He should be back soon."

Still smiling broadly, Nicole stood and grabbed her purse before putting the uneaten banana back in the bowl. "You will love it there, Christine. It'll help you forget all that awful stuff. Just...to relax on the beach. It's like heaven, you know?"

Christine waited for a few minutes after Nicole left to get up and go to the back door, stepping out into the backyard and standing there in the sunlight.

Therapy. That hadn't really helped. All it did was rake up the memories and feelings over and over.

Relocation. The trip to Hawaii would be her trial attempt at that, perhaps.

And then there was still hypnotism. Maybe she would have to look into that.

Four Months Previously

What an odd girl she was.

He sat silently in his chair, pretending to be absorbed in a newspaper. She was sitting cross-legged on the floor, attempting to complete a jigsaw puzzle. Pieces were scattered around, arranged according to color, and she was looking most...puzzled. He had offered his help twice, but each time she had smiled at him and had said,

"That wouldn't be fair at all! You'd just do it for me. I want to try."

The completed puzzle was supposed to be the Eiffel Tower. She had completed a small section of the blue sky, and that was it. Her brow was furrowed, her pink lips puckered in an annoyed sort of fashion, and she mumbled to herself occasionally.

"Stupid puzzle," she would say now and again, trying to put a few pieces together. They did not fit, and she scowled at them as she tried again and again. "Who even likes these, anyway?"

A blonde curl fell in front of her face, and she pushed it behind her ear impatiently.

"All the pieces look the same, and the colors on them are so similar. How do people do this? Am I just stupid, Erik?" She looked up at him with a small piece in each hand.

"My dear, I believe that is the purpose of such an exercise. It is supposed to challenge you, and it requires time. Have some patience."

She laughed. "Not one of my better qualities. Still..." She looked back down at the mess, humming absentmindedly, biting her pink lower lip. He watched, catching a glimpse of her white teeth. What an odd, delightful girl.

She never did finish the puzzle. After three days of lying uselessly on the floor, the puzzle had been put away. It had only been an unsightly catastrophe in his front room. Then she had been upset.

"I wasn't done with it!" she said. "Aw man..."

"You did not touch it for three days," he said to her. "I had assumed you had lost interest."

"I had." She laughed suddenly. "But then it's gone, y'know, and suddenly I want to keep trying. I'm like a little kid or something...It's okay, though. You're right. I never would have finished it."

He took her into the city that evening, to a restaurant with concealed, private booths—the first time such a thing had been done. She looked nervous, glancing around, continually adjusting the sleeves of her blue dress.

"Does something bother you?" he asked. "We may leave if you wish."

"No!" she said quickly, blushing. "It's just...so fancy here. I've never been anywhere this expensive before." She laughed a little. It sounded strained. "I'm not sophisticated enough for it. I'll probably use the wrong fork or something. Ha."

The comment made him smile slightly. "My dear, you belong here. You are grace itself. And you should not worry." He leaned over and picked up one of the three forks that were sitting by her plate. "This is the one to use first."

She took it, smiling a little at him. "Please teach me these fancy ways, Maestro."

"It will be an honor."

His comment seemed to please her, for her smile widened. He let her order whatever she wished, allowed her to eat as much or as little as she wished of each dish, and said nothing when she blushing asked for strawberry ice cream for dessert. He answered questions as to the utensils and glasses, though the wine glasses remained untouched and unused. She did not like alcohol. But he would have paid good money to see her pale cheeks flushed even deeper with its effects, to see her blue eyes sparkle in a carefree manner that only copious amounts of alcohol could bring.

Still, she looked exceedingly lovely even now, her hair falling over her shoulders, a blonde so fair and light, pale as her skin. She was ethereal porcelain, delicate and fragile. One wrong touch would smudge her, stain her, ruin her forever. She needed to be locked away somewhere secure, protected from the filth and grime that would undoubtedly latch onto something so pure and clean.

It all made him hate himself even more.

Yet he could not stop himself. He could not stop himself as he listened to her prattle on happily about some mishap that had happened to her some years ago, and when she laughed about it, he felt his weak, foolish heart skip a beat. These were sensations he had never expected to experience. These were sensations he had never believed to *exist*. And yet here he was, completely enslaved by this...*girl*. This girl who spilled strawberry ice cream on her dress and now looked close to tears.

"It's ruined," she said, her voice trembling, as she tried to wipe at it with her napkin.

"Nonsense," he replied. "It is fine."

"But it's so beautiful, and I ruined it, and it was probably so expensive..." She actually sniffled a bit and continued to rub at the spot.

"I do not care about the dress," he said shortly. "You are to do with it as you please."

"But I didn't want to spill on it!" She put the napkin down defeatedly and hung her head low. "I wanted to keep it nice."

He resisted rolling his eyes. Immature. Childish, even, to do so. Instead he clicked his tongue impatiently.

"Calm yourself. It is no matter. I am sure it is something easily fixed. Do not distress yourself so. Perhaps it is time for us to leave, yes? We will go, and you will sing something for me. I wish to hear you sing Dvořák. You will do that for me, yes? You will do that for Erik?"

She nodded and tried to smile at him. "Yes. I'll always sing for you."

He could see her touch the stain on her dress throughout the journey back. Later, he had the infernal thing taken out to professional cleaners, and when he had presented it to her again, clean and spotless, she had actually burst into tears at the sight and had thanked him over and over. It baffled him.

She was odd. And he adored her for it.

Chapter 5: Chapter 5

It was all breathtaking. She tried not to take it all in at once. Slowly, bit by bit, she let the beauty overwhelm her. The white beaches. The salty ocean air. The green plants and trees. The flowers everywhere. The constant sunshine.

She had four whole days of this, and she sat in the chair out on the little front porch of the small beach house, looking out into the blue ocean. The beach was crowded with summer vacationers, and while she wanted to go lie down on the beach, she preferred a bit of solitude, just to relax and think.

The plane ride over had felt long, even though she had spent most of the ride dozing uncomfortably against the window. Their layover in San Francisco was a two-hour chance for her to stretch her legs and try to clear her head. Then it was onto another plane, a red-eye flight that was even worse than the one before. She had only flown once before, as an eleven year-old. Her maternal great-aunt had died, and her father had thought it important to go show support to his late wife's side of the family, even though neither he nor Christine had ever really met the woman who had passed. The relatives there had been distant, great aunts and uncles and second and third cousins, people Christine had never seen before. And then she had never seen them again. Gradually, she and her father had simply drifted away from them all, and the others hadn't reached out to bring them back. So it had always just been the two of them.

And now it was just Christine. She rolled her bottle of water up and down her thighs, wondering what she would do for food. Raoul and his uncle had gone hiking, Nicole had gone shopping, and Christine, not wanting to do either of those things, had feigned a bad headache, saying that the plane ride had exhausted her. She *had* actually slept for a couple hours, so...she wasn't really lying. Not exactly.

Mostly she was nervous. True to her word, Nicole had gotten them a private little beach house, and Christine hadn't known that she had actually done it until they had arrived early that morning. She hadn't said anything, because she didn't know how she felt about it all yet. Maybe tonight, when it was time for bed, she would finally figure it out.

After a little while longer, she got up, grabbed her purse and sandals, and left, making sure she was conscious of just where she was going. It would be embarrassing to get lost and not be back at the beach house when Raoul returned after insisting on staying back because she didn't feel well.

She walked until she found a small cluster of shops, and she sat in a sunny little cafe and ordered an overpriced sandwich and glass of lemonade. She watched as people walked back and forth, old couples holding hands, parents looking haggard as they shepherded their screaming children, women in tiny string bikinis, laughing as they went. Christine almost blushed just looking at them. Maybe she had always been a little too conservative...She looked down at her shorts and loose white top. Underneath that was her bathing suit...a plain purple one piece. Maybe spending most of her life without a mother had done that to her. Or...was it the opposite? Were girls without mothers supposed to be carefree and loose with themselves and their bodies?

Whatever. Christine finished her lunch and then left, taking her time and walking along the beach, dodging kids and weaving in and out of groups of people. It didn't really matter anyway. She was...how she was. And that was a good thing right now. No one was blaming her for what had happened. No one who knew her accused her of "seducing" ...*him* or luring him in or acting provocative or...some other stupid thing like that. Even though *he* had blamed her for it several times.

You haven't a clue what you do to me, do you, you silly girl? No, you are really quite ignorant.

I never wished for it all. I never wished to be drawn in by you. And yet that is what happened. What, Christine? How can you cry when you are the one who holds me prisoner? I wish I could let you out of this miserable place and let you free! Yet I cannot...not as long as I love you.

Christine blinked and suddenly realized she had been standing there and blankly staring out into the foamy waves for the last several minutes. She shook her head, cleared her throat, and set off again with a blush.

Always blushing, my dear! My darling, innocent girl. How have you managed to survive this long in such a world?

And she saw something that made her blush again, deep and red.

"Hey! Christine!" Raoul was standing there, waving at her, looking perfectly beach-appropriate in his swim trunks. She gave a little wave back, and he ran to her while she walked up to meet him.

"Hey!" he said, grinning widely. "Are you feeling better?"

She nodded. "Yeah. A lot better, thanks."

"Good! I'm glad. Nicole was worried. I mean, I was too, obviously. But you look a lot better." He smiled again, looking around. "Are you hungry? I can show you some places if you want to eat."

"No, I'm not hungry." She gestured vaguely to the beach. "I was just taking a walk to clear my head."

"Yeah, it's nice here, isn't it?" He set off with her back to the beach house. "I used to come here every summer with David and Nicole. But you know that. Remember that summer I tried to make them take you with us?"

She giggled a little at the memory. "Yeah. My dad wouldn't let me. I cried when I couldn't go."

"I think I might've cried, too," Raoul said, laughing along with her. "Nicole said no as well. But I guess maybe nine years old is a little too young to start going on romantic getaways together."

Christine laughed again and tried to ignore the next blush that stung her cheeks. Instead she veered the topic of conversation to the hike he had been on that morning, and Raoul gladly told her all about it and the trail and how he had first hiked it with his uncle when he was eleven and that it had become a tradition for the two of them to hike it every time they came here. The simple, uncomplicated, unquestioning chatter was welcome, and they went to sit on the small porch of the beach house. She continued to enjoy the warm, humid air and the smell of the ocean, and Raoul made her laugh as he spoke. They exchanged a few memories, and she was aware that they were both consciously making it a point to keep their conversation away from the recent past. Maybe neither wanted to think about the future just yet...and the present was now being used to discuss happier, less complicated times.

David and Nicole returned after another while, and there were some awkward, happy exclamations as to how glad they were that Christine was feeling better and was smiling with Raoul.

"You already look ten times better, sweetheart," Nicole said, reaching over to squeeze Christine's hand. "I knew this trip would be just the thing for you!"

Then there was a dinner reservation at an absurdly-expensive restaurant. Christine felt distinctly underdressed, but as she had had no idea just where they were going, she had simply put on a sundress. Still...as she sat there, she felt a wave of memories overwhelm her, and she sat silently for a good portion of the meal. It was all just so...much. There was still so much to think about and decide, and she was already so tired of doing all that. Thinking and deciding...weighing options, considering other possible outcomes...wondering so many things—always wondering. Raoul quietly leaned over and asked if she was all right, and she nodded.

"Just tired again," she replied, smiling over at him for extra measure. He smiled in return and went back to talking to his aunt and uncle about the volcano that they were all going to see in a few days.

She glanced over at Raoul as he spoke. He was animated, smiling still, looking happy and content. The bruises around his neck were gone. Maybe some of the horrors went with them, too. This was the most relaxed and comfortable she had seen him in a long time. Or maybe he was just making it a point to forget, to move on. That seemed more likely. Some things would never be forgotten, but he was obviously not willing to let one event destroy him.

Was she? That was a troubling question.

Back in the beach house, she pretended to be asleep while she heard Raoul trying to dig through his bag quietly, maybe looking for a toothbrush or his glasses. He wore contact lenses during the day. She remembered when he got glasses for the first time. They had just turned nine, and his new glasses had given the other kids at the elementary school yet another reason to tease him.

Christine had to hide a small smile at the memory, burying her face in the pillow. Poor Raoul—nevermind that he had only been at the school for barely six months, still spoke accented English, had a funny-sounding and hard to pronounce name, and now lived with his aunt and uncle, but he had just become a "nerd" because of his glasses. Christine remembered spending long hours after school listening to Raoul complain in his boyish, melodramatic way.

"I was cool at my other school!" he had told her indignantly, scowling and kicking a rock as they continued their walk home. "None of the other infants laughed at me!"

"Infants means babies," Christine said to him. She had been the only one who could correct his English without getting glared at. "Say 'kids' instead." Then she thought for a moment. "Sometimes my dad wears glasses to read. I think that's okay."

"But he's old," Raoul had said. "Only old people and...and *nerds* have to wear glasses." He sounded close to tears, and Christine had suggested going to her house and sneaking some ice cream since her dad was still away working for another hour. That had cheered him up.

She wished she could still cheer him up with some stolen ice cream. Now she didn't know what to do. However, he seemed to be doing well here, so maybe it actually was just what he needed. And was it what she needed? Maybe. In a way. It did feel nice to have a change of scenery, a change in the routine. But she still felt pulled back, held back by something. It was still too hard to let go completely.

After a couple minutes, she felt the mattress shift slightly as he climbed into the bed. She wasn't uncomfortable with him there, but she didn't try to move closer or pretend to wake up in order to talk to him. But soon enough, she could sense him falling asleep anyway. She lay there a while longer, listening to the rhythmic crashing of the waves, and it lulled her into a doze. A fan was blowing toward the bed, keeping the temperature bearable, and Christine settled in to sleep, once again wondering what *he* was doing at that moment.

The noise would undoubtedly be the death of him. He had forgotten how *noisy* it was to travel by freight train. Had it always been so? Perhaps he had simply grown old. He wondered if his migraine would ever dissipate. Then again, most everything had become more difficult as the years passed.

And this was the hardest of all.

He glanced at the time again. Ten in the morning. There were still some thousand kilometers or so until his destination, and he had been holed up in this accursed compartment for the majority of the journey. There were several places he wished to avoid. Detection in certain cities was the last thing he wished. Berlin...Prague...and especially Tirana. No, his brief stops in those cities would be easiest if they remained unknown.

If only the noise would cease. Perhaps then he would be able to sleep for an hour or two. As it was, the rattling and screeching of the train seemed to drill a hole through his skull. Had he had anything to take, he would have ingested it immediately to knock himself out, never mind who might stumble upon him. Not that anyone would. He was secure in this space.

He pressed his hands against his ears, resisting the urge to growl. There was nothing to distract him from it, either. He had not allowed himself any new reading material, any substances, and he had deliberately snapped his Sennheiser headphones in order to resist temptation. He could not allow himself...Not anymore. He did not deserve it.

Still, his fingers wandered over and dug through the small bag he had with him. Against the commands of his brain, his hands pulled out the laptop and opened it. And contrary to the deliberate and sharp forbidding that he continued to tell himself, he sifted through the materials, looking through the windows. The seafoam green pages blurred together, and he devoured them, reading sentences he had long since memorized, an addict unable to control himself.

I know this sounds ridiculous, but I can't help but feel that something amazing is going to happen to me. I'm not just supposed to sit here like I am.

He checked the most recent entry. It had been almost six months ago, yet he hadn't expected anything else. *This* post made him disgusted and delighted with himself at the same time.

It's finally happening! I knew something big was always going to happen to me, and I just can't believe it's now. I'm so happy. I'm finally going to do what I love and what I've always dreamed of doing. New York, here I come!

She had been so inordinately thrilled, and he had selfishly demanded all of her attention and praises. He could still remember what she constantly said to him those first few weeks, her voice flustered, excited, breathless:

I can't believe this! Thank you, thank you, Erik! This is literally a dream come true. I can't believe it's all really happening!

And she had smiled and blushed and looked at him constantly throughout. He had lapped it all up, had wanted to drown in her attention and somehow consume everything she had to offer. Her laughs, her smiles, her occasional girlish tears...It was all music to him. Everything had been perfect. He had wanted to remain that way for the rest of his life, and he wanted her to be there for every moment of it.

But that was obviously not what had transpired, as he was very much alone in the train, tucked away uncomfortably with his teeth chattering from the noise. He put away the laptop and then hated himself for even getting it out in the first place, and so he punished himself by then sitting straight up and listening to the screaming and squealing of the train. He deserved it anyway, though. After everything he had done, he deserved far worse than this. He deserved to be alone, miserable, hated for the rest of his existence, and as he thought of *her*, thousands of miles away, undoubtedly somewhere warm and safe...with *him—that boy*—he knew that the only fitting punishment, the one that would be the greatest source of pain to him, would be to do everything in his power to ensure that he never saw her again.

The water was lapping against her toes. Christine squinted at them, wishing she had thought to repaint them before coming to the island. The red paint was chipped, and she buried her toes in the sand instead, looking back up to the waves, clutching the board to herself tightly. Raoul was currently in the water, demonstrating for her how to bodyboard, and she shifted her weight somewhat anxiously, trying to memorize everything he was doing. She was trying to be positive and upbeat, so when Raoul had offered to teach her how to bodyboard one morning, she had agreed, not letting him see her nervousness. She had always loved visiting the ocean with her father when she was younger, but she had never been a very good swimmer. Mostly she had played in the shallow water while he had watched carefully.

At least it wasn't full-on surfing or anything like that. She glanced back to their things on the beach, making sure they were still safe. There wasn't anything *too* valuable; they had both left their phones in the beach house, locked up safe. Still, she liked those shorts, and she didn't really want her only beach towel to get stolen, even though there was only one night left.

The time had seemed to drag and yet whirl past her all at once. Three days of Hawaii already. It had been fun. And tiring. And depressing. It had been...everything. Was it exactly what she had needed? A few late nights of pondering led her to the conclusion that it probably wasn't. She didn't know what she needed. But it had been a good way to take her mind off of a lot of things, at least for a few days.

Raoul came splashing up to her, grinning widely, carrying his blue bodyboard. This trip had obviously been good for him. She could sense it. He was acting more and more like himself, like he had acted before the whole...thing. Christine couldn't count the number of times she wished that for herself. She wanted to move on and start to forget and let it all be an incident in her past.

She then realized that Raoul was talking, and she tried to focus on what he had said.

"Okay, got it?" he said. "It's not that hard. Just start to go when the wave is about to break."

She nodded quickly, clutching the green bodyboard a little tighter, and Raoul laughed, maybe seeing the nervousness on her face.

"It's fun. Not hard. And if you have any problems, I'll be right here."

"Okay. I'll...yeah. I'll go try. I hope I don't drown." She then waded into the water, tried to set herself up, and was then flipped over by the next wave. She emerged, coughing and spluttering, and saw Raoul on the beach, laughing at her. She blushed, tried again, and was again carried under the wave. Two more unsuccessful tries led her to carry her bodyboard back to the shore in defeat, where Raoul was waiting for her, still smiling and obviously doing his best not to laugh in her face.

They continued for sometime longer, and he demonstrated for her and taught her some more. After trying a few more times and still failing, Christine admitted ultimate defeat. She went back to shore, soaked and red in the face, but she giggled a little as Raoul took the board from her and led the way up the beach to their things.

"Maybe we'll do something that requires less coordination," he teased lightly. "Like napping or people-watching or tanning..."

She laughed again. "I would be really great at all of those."

They went back to the beach house, and Christine changed out of the suit and into another sundress, hoping to have an uneventful final evening...maybe at a quiet restaurant and then sitting out on the beach and just relaxing. It was getting late, and she tried to brush out her tangled mess of hair, wincing a little as the comb tugged at her scalp.

A light touch against her shoulder made her jump, and she looked up quickly to see Raoul there, smiling softly.

"Oh," she said. "You scared me! I thought you were still in the bathroom changing."

"All changed," he said, gesturing to his dry clothing. "Want me to do that?"

"What? My hair? Oh, no, it's—" To her slight surprise, he took the brush out of her hand anyway and picked up her wet hair, beginning to comb out the ends.

"You really don't have to," she protested.

"It's fine. I want to." He paused to put a hand on her shoulder again, this time softer and more affectionate, and she swallowed and sat there, feeling her heart pound and her stomach churn.

He had touched her hair, too. He had loved her hair. It had been unsettling how much he had liked it.

It is like silk, my dear. Golden silk.

A couple times, she had considered cutting it off and dyeing it brown in protest and to upset him, but she had feared *his* anger too much. He would have been irate. Once early on in the summer, she had gone to lessons having used a flat-iron to straighten out her curls, and he had thrown a fit. Hurriedly, terrified, she had tried to explain.

No—no, Erik, it's not permanent, I promise! It's just—I just wanted to try something different. I'm...my hair will be normal tomorrow!

Do not do this again, do you understand? Why would you deliberately sabotage something so beautiful?

That had annoyed her a lot. She had actually liked the look. It had made her look older, more sophisticated and modern. Well...that's what she thought. Apparently *he* had had a different impression.

A sharp tug to her head caused her to gasp, and in the mirror she could see Raoul wince at the sound and hurriedly pull the comb away from her hair.

"Sorry," he said hastily. "I guess I'm not good at this."

"No, my hair is just a mess from the water." She took the comb back from him and tried to finish. "It needs experienced hands."

Raoul gave a small laugh, and after a few more minutes she had managed to work her way through the impossible tangles. Hoping it would dry in a way that wasn't too embarrassing, Christine set the brush down and stood, stretching a little.

"What are we doing tonight, then?" she asked

Raoul shrugged. "Whatever we want. David and Nicole went out for drinks, and I think they're going dancing afterward. We could do that, if you wanted."

Christine paused and said, "I kind of wanted something...quieter tonight. If that's okay."

He smiled. "Yeah. Me too, actually." Then he reached over and grabbed his shoes. "Let's go for a walk on the beach. Hopefully not too many drunk teenagers will be hanging around."

She giggled at that and took his outstretched hand, and together they left. The night was calm, warm, breezy—perfect, and the beach was quiet. They strolled along, Raoul holding her hand comfortably, and she looked over the ocean, listening to the waves rush onto the shore.

Which side of the ocean was he on now?

With a short shake of her head, she forced herself to look away. She couldn't keep thinking like that. Her whole life would be spent wondering, thinking...And that was the last thing she wanted. She didn't want to keep questioning.

"I'm really, really glad you came with us, Christine."

She looked over and smiled a little at Raoul. "Thanks again for inviting me. It's been really nice." And she did mean that. Overall, she was very happy that she had decided to come.

"Yeah, it has, hasn't it? I feel like we haven't really had a chance to...you know, be *together* since the whole...thing." There was a significant pause, and she could sense him struggle with the right words. She wished he wouldn't, wished he would just leave it alone, but he needed this. She had to remind herself. He needed this. And she owed it to him. It was all because of *her*, after all...

"I feel...like, a lot better now, I think. I mean, obviously there are some times...A couple days ago when we were out, David put his arm around me, around my neck, just as a joke...That actually did freak me out. I tried not to let show, but...it's not completely over, you know?"

"Yeah," she replied, kicking up a little bit of white sand. It blew on her legs. "Nothing will really be the same, I don't think."

"Well, yeah, but...*some* things are still the same, right?" A long, long, *long* pause. She knew he was waiting for her reassurance, but she couldn't bring herself to say anything. He then said quietly, "*We're* still the same, right? Christine?"

She stopped and looked up at him, wishing that it didn't have to be their last night here on this calm, breezy beach and that he didn't have to look so hopeful and handsome.

"I think so," she replied. "I'm still just...so confused about so many things. I'm sorry. I wish I could tell you what you wanted to hear."

He visibly swallowed. "No. I'm glad you're being honest with me." Then he stepped closer and hugged her tightly, and she pressed her cheek into his warm chest, willing herself not to cry.

"Sounds like we'll have to postpone our summer wedding," he said quietly, and she was able to giggle.

Sometime later, back at the beach house, they lay in an uncomfortable silence. She could tell that he was doing his best not to touch her or brush up against her under the sheets. Nothing had happened between them during their time in the little beach house, but the understanding had been mutual. He could tell she wasn't willing, and she wasn't so sure that he was ready, either.

Before Raoul, there had never been anyone she had ever actually been interested in being with. After their reunion in New York, though...she had wondered a few times if he would be her first. And she hadn't been opposed to the thought. But there had been...obvious complications. As soon as *he* had found out what Raoul's intentions were, he had forbidden everything. And if he had ever found out that Raoul had so much as *touched* her, let alone slept with her, *he* would have taken her away forever.

Now there was so much baggage about the whole issue. They hadn't even really kissed since the traumatic ordeal, and suddenly sleeping together the night before they left would have only caused further regression in their relationship and healing.

Still, Raoul was being a little *too* careful, and he stiffly shifted next to her, resting his hands on his stomach to keep them from touching her. She frowned and reached over, putting her fingers on his arm.

"It's okay," she said quietly, not sure what *okay* actually meant in this context. "I really had a nice time here with you. Thank you for everything." She clumsily leaned over and kissed his cheek.

Raoul was visibly relieved by this, and he gave her a smile. "Well, this is a yearly thing for us, so next year I'll take you to more places, like the other islands. Maybe we could even do some snorkeling or sailing." He carefully slid his fingers over hers, obviously encouraged by the kiss.

"That would be fun," she murmured, feeling incredibly sad at this for some reason.

He tightened his grip on her hand and said, his voice shaking a little, "I just want to tell you...You can talk to me about anything, okay? *Anything*."

She looked over at him, barely able to distinguish his features in the darkness of the little beach cottage. The fan and air conditioning buzzed comfortably around them, and she could hear the waves of the ocean.

"I know," she said quietly. "Thank you."

It looked like he smiled slightly. "Back to the real world tomorrow," he then sighed, running his thumb over the back of her hand.

The real world. A world full of decisions she had to make, questions that had be answered, and a world with *him*. Because he was somewhere in it, and she knew she would never find out where.

***Chapter 6*: Chapter 6**

"What a mess."

Christine knelt next to her suitcase, hurriedly trying to stuff everything inside. It felt like there was sand on every piece of clothing she owned, and she could feel it, gritty and coarse, against the bottom of her suitcase as well.

"We're going to be late," Raoul said again, grabbing his own things and throwing them haphazardly into his bag. "We have to hurry."

"I know," she replied shortly.

They had both slept longer than they had intended, and that in turn resulted in neither of them being prepared to leave for the airport the next morning. David and Nicole were already waiting for them, obviously having done the responsible thing and either packed their suitcases the night previously or gotten up early to do it. Christine hoped that they weren't too upset and were instead condescendingly amused, maybe saying something to themselves like, *Oh, kids these days*.

Still, they were in high danger of missing their flight if they didn't hurry, and Christine could feel her hands actually shaking a little bit as she worked. It would be awful if she caused them to miss it.

"Where...? Oh, I don't believe it!" Raoul jumped up and ran to the bathroom, and she could hear him rummaging through the empty cupboards. "Where did I leave my glasses?"

"They're not in their case?" Christine called, seeing the black case sticking out of a side pocket of his bag.

"Obviously not," Raoul snapped. "Have you seen them anywhere?"

She shook her head, refusing to feel hurt by his tone. They were both just stressed and in a hurry, and they probably hadn't gotten enough sleep last night. Instead, she abandoned her suitcase and began to look, shaking out the bedclothes and looking under the pillows.

"David will kill us if we miss this flight," Raoul said, coming back into the front room. "What are you doing? No—just finish packing your own suitcase!"

"But I found them!" Christine said, peering under the bed. "They must've fallen down from the nightstand. Here, I'll grab them..." She crawled on her belly a few inches and reached out to grab the glasses, coughing as some of the dust and sand from the floor tickled her throat. After emerging, she looked up to see that Raoul had taken over her suitcase and was busily cramming her last few items of clothing into her own bag. She slipped his glasses in the protective case and zipped up the pocket while he finished with her suitcase, and then they stood and switched.

"All my clothes are going to be so wrinkled when I pull them out," she said as they left the little beach house.

Raoul led the way, not pausing to look back as they made their way up the beach to a taxi that was parked and waiting for them on the road. "Better wrinkled clothes than a missed flight. We should've packed everything earlier."

Then it was a hurried drive to the airport, an impatient wait through security, and a slightly-panicked jog to their terminal, where the flight was still boarding. David and Nicole had mostly ignored the two of them, obviously irritated that they had been so close to missing a flight. However, as soon as Nicole saw that they were going to make it, she turned to the two of them and smiled a little.

"Whew, just in time! What a fun trip. Too bad it's over already."

They chatted for a while as they shuffled onto the plane and into their seats, but not long after the plane took off, Christine found herself dozing against the window again. Raoul gave her his sweatshirt to use as a pillow, and she fell into an uncomfortable sleep for several hours, only waking when it was time to land for their layover.

After they stepped off the plane, David rubbed his neck, looking at them. "Well, we have two hours until our next flight. You kids want something to eat? We won't find anything very good here, but it'll keep you full until we get home, at least."

Christine was just about to nod in agreement when she looked up to Raoul. His face was set, his mouth thin, and his brow furrowed.

"No, thanks," he said shortly.

David frowned a little and then looked at Christine. "What about you, sweetheart? Nicole and I are going to get something. You can come with us."

Christine glanced up to Raoul again, feeling somewhat nervous at his expression. He didn't look at her.

"Um..." She wondered if she should stay with Raoul and ask what was wrong. Maybe he was tired and irritable from the plane ride and needed some time to cool down. She looked back to David and Nicole. "Yeah, I'll come. I'm hungry, I guess."

They went to some over-priced place that boasted only organic, locally-grown and bought ingredients, and Christine picked at her small, expensive salad for a little while. David and Nicole talked about the trip, and Christine chimed in when it was necessary. Neither of them mentioned Raoul's odd behavior, which relaxed her a bit. He probably just wanted to get home.

When they got back to the terminal, however, and Christine sat down by him, he stood abruptly.

"I'm going to go walk around until we board," he said, not looking at her. "I'm tired of sitting for so long."

"I'll text you when we're boarding," Nicole said. "Just don't go too far!"

"I'll come with you, if you'd like," Christine offered, somewhat nervously.

"No," Raoul said curtly. "It's fine. I'll be back later." And he walked off.

She curled up into the chair, watching him go and eventually disappear into the crowd.

"He must be tired from the trip," Nicole said, frowning. "I'm sure he didn't mean anything by it, Christine."

"Yeah, he can get a little short-tempered when tired," David chimed in. "He was like that as a kid. One time he stayed up too late, and then the next morning he dumped his breakfast on the ground on purpose because he didn't like the way the eggs had been cooked." He laughed then. "Remember that, Nicole? He must've been eight years old, right when he first came to us."

Nicole laughed as well, and then they started exchanging memories. Christine half-listened, still slightly worried. She tried to think of something she had done that might have annoyed him. Sure, she hadn't packed in advance, but neither had he...and he had been the one to lose his glasses. Maybe he had actually wanted the window seat, or...

Christine huffed. There wasn't anything she could do about whatever it was now. He just needed to get some sleep and get over it. She pulled out her phone and stared at it mindlessly for a half hour or so, and then Nicole texted Raoul to come back to board.

He came back, grabbed his bag, and got in line to board, all without looking at her or saying anything to her. A little shocked and offended, she picked up her own bag and got in line behind him, fuming and worried at the same time. She glanced toward Nicole, who just shrugged helplessly and apologetically, and then they sat down on the plane. Christine stared out of the window for several minutes before looking over at him. He was texting someone on his phone.

"Are you okay?" she asked quietly, making sure no one else could hear them.

"Fine," he said, still refusing to look at her.

Christine sat there and then folded her arms, looking back out of the window. If he wanted to act like a child, then she certainly wasn't going to stop him!

She slept on and off throughout the flight, both of them sitting in resolute silence. Raoul had put in some earphones and was listening to music, and Christine then realized she had forgotten her own headphones back at the beach house. If he hadn't been acting the way he was, she might have asked to listen with him, both using one earbud, but he continued to stare straight ahead and pretend like she wasn't there. Now grumpy herself, she glared moodily out of the window, wishing she had brought a book or something else to entertain her.

With nothing else to do, her mind drifted as she stared over the gathering darkness and the lights that were beginning to pop up over the landscape far beneath them. All of those lights belonged to someone. Homes, cars, stores, businesses...Places with people, obviously. Because where there was light, there was usually people. Except...

She swallowed, wishing there was somewhere else for her train of thoughts to go, but it was impossible. Everything seemed to return to *him*, every vague impression or feeling somehow tied itself together with memories of him and of their time together.

Once, he had taken her to a pretty theater late at night, and it had been completely empty. Nervously, she had asked him if they were allowed to go in, but he had merely laughed and led the way through the doors. It hadn't been an answer, but she had still followed him, glancing around, as if someone would come running over and tell them to leave or...arrest them or something.

But no one had been there. The stage lights were on, and he had had her sing for a while, and then she had asked for him to play for her, and then they had spent hours there, taking turns performing for each other. She hadn't felt tired or sleepy in the slightest, caught up in the music and in *him*. He had played a few famous pieces for her, but soon it morphed into creation, and he had sat there and had simply *played*. The music in him came out, but there was no feverish scribbling of notes or revisions. It had been pure music, heard once and never again, and played only for her. He had said so many things in his music, and she had curled up in the front row of chairs and had listened.

All of it is for you. Everything.

I...I don't know if I want it all, Erik.

You will take it. You must.

Why?

Because I am giving it to you. That is why.

It hadn't made sense to her then, and it didn't now, sitting on a hot, sticky plane, waiting impatiently for it to land so she could escape and breathe fresh air. And then maybe Raoul would get some sleep and stop ignoring her.

What felt like an eternity later, the captain was announcing their descent, and Raoul put his phone away but still looked straight ahead. Christine tried not to let herself care, and after the plane landed and they were allowed to make their way off the plane and into the airport, she opted to stay near Nicole and talk to her about how busy the airport was and ask where the baggage claim was and chat mindlessly instead of stay close to her boyfriend.

As they waited for their bags, she could hear David ask him, "Are you doing okay?"

"Fine," Raoul said again. "Just tired."

And that was the end of it. David drove the forty-five minutes back to the house, and it was spent mostly in silence, with only the radio filling up the space and Nicole's occasional comments on how busy she would be over the upcoming week because of how long she had been gone.

"Still, it was such a fun vacation! I'm so glad you decided to come, Christine," she said, turning to smile at her.

Christine smiled back. "Yeah, thanks for inviting me. I had a lot of fun."

"I'll bet the trip did wonders for you two," Nicole said, looking between them happily and expectantly.

Raoul scoffed quietly, and there was a long, awkward pause. Nicole looked embarrassed and then faced the front, turning up the radio. No one said anything else, even as they drove up and pulled into the garage. Christine grabbed her bag and headed up to her room, more than ready to have some privacy and be alone for a while. Her eyes were itching with exhaustion, and she could already feel the cool sheets and fluffy pillows.

"Hey."

She turned to see Raoul there. "You left your purse in the car," he said tonelessly, holding it out.

"Thanks." She took it and eyed him warily before trying one more time. "You sure you're all right?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" he said coldly. "Everything is fine."

"All right, then," she replied, suddenly extremely irritated. "If you say so."

"Yeah, everything is great, isn't it? We just spent a week in Hawaii together, because we're a couple." His voice was hard, accusing, and low, and Christine bristled.

"I don't know what's going on," she snapped. "But I'm not going to do this. Whenever you're ready to start acting like an adult and talk to me about what's bothering you, I'll be ready."

She had taken two steps closer to her door when he half-shouted, "*Talk* to you about what's bothering me? Like you do? Like how you don't talk to me about *anything*?"

Christine jumped a little at the sudden increase in volume, and she whirled around, looking at him in the dim hallway light. She put her bags down by the door, trying to brace herself. A fight. They were going to have a fight about something. At eleven o'clock at night, with David and Nicole in the house. She felt her stomach churn at the thought.

"Maybe we should do this later," she suggested quietly, though her own voice was cold.

"No, we're going to *talk* now," Raoul replied, his lips somewhat white and his hands fisted.

She crossed her arms. "Okay. Go ahead. Tell me what it is you obviously want to say."

He laughed, but it was sarcastic and short and not nice-sounding at all. "Right. Because that's how this works. We just tell each other what's bothering us, because that's how *normal* couples do it, and we're so normal, aren't we, Christine?"

Her annoyance was building, and she could have shouted as well, but she tried to stay calm. Still, her voice was just as hard as his as she said: "I'm too tired for this, Raoul. I'm not going to play these stupid mind games. Just *tell* me!"

"And then you'll quietly listen and then what?" he spat. "Then what? Then what? You'll go hide in your room and think who knows what and not touch me and look as if you're *still* trapped by something? Is that it?"

Christine tried to pick apart his rant, and she nearly choked. "You're angry because I don't *touch* you? Are you mad about last night? *Seriously*?" Maybe she had been all wrong. Maybe Raoul had wanted something and she had been too oblivious to see it. But even so...the thought that he could possibly be *angry* about that made her temper rise even higher.

"Well, no one would blame me if I were!" he shot back. "Because it's not as if you haven't done it to someone else before, and why should I care? I'm just your boyfriend!"

She was going to say something cruel—something like, "*Well, after this I'm not so sure about that!*" But she knew how much words spoken out of anger could hurt someone, and so she tried to keep as rational as possible. But it was just so hard. She was furious and exhausted and hungry, and Raoul was undoubtedly exactly the same.

"But actually, that's not really what I wanted to ask you about," he continued, not letting her speak or try to defend herself. He had it all planned out, she realized. He knew exactly what he wanted to say. "I thought that you needed space, so I didn't pressure you for anything. But now I realize..." He pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket, and when he began reading it, her heart stopped.

"*Erik. I'll never forget that show in New York. It was seriously one of the happiest moments of my life. I'd never felt so amazing.*"

She was choking again, and her face was on fire. It felt impossible that he was reading this to her, reading her very own words back to her, and she wanted to disappear and take that letter with her.

But he continued, his hand shaking, his voice a mocking imitation of hers but still cold and irate: "*That night in New York with the show, I really thought that I could love you. That I did love you. That kiss was just real. For me. I think about it all the time. That's why I kissed you again.*" Here his voice wavered, bordering on shouting again, almost out of control, "*Yeah, it's real, and I'm kissing you. And it's okay, Erik. We're okay.*" He crushed it in his fist and looked up at her. "So you're okay! And all this time I was worried that you were still afraid some masked stalker was going to come kidnap you again! My mistake. I guess this whole time you've been wondering where he is!"

She took several long, deep breaths, feeling like she was about to pass out.

"Where did you get that?" she finally whispered, her voice not strong anymore. She was defeated already. There was really nothing left. That letter ruined everything she had against him.

"Right. Because obviously it's more important *how* I get this secret love note to your murdering boyfriend than what's in it. Okay." He coughed, maybe an old habit that reassured him that he was still breathing. "It just fell out of the pocket of your shorts when I was packing for you. I didn't know what it was and we were in a hurry, so I just stuck it in my pocket. I thought it was a receipt or something. Or maybe even some old notes from one of your classes. I don't know. I was going to ask you on the plane, but you were asleep. And so I looked to see. Stupid, right? So stupid. I should've known that every piece of paper in your suitcase is full of secrets and things that you don't want me to know. I'm some sneaking, cheating jerk because I glanced at a piece of paper to see what was on it. Right? Right?"

She hadn't said any of that, and even though she had had flashes of those exact thoughts as he had read it out loud, she knew he was right. It wasn't his fault. None of it had been. She couldn't say anything. He had had too much time to prepare this argument against her, and he had already won, but he still had more to say.

"Honestly, I'm glad I found it!" he said, his voice one of fake, awful enthusiasm. "I mean, at least now I know what you're thinking about and what's going on with you. And here I am, a month later, still trying to put us back together." He let the paper drop to the ground, and it lay there, a huge barrier between them. She stared at it, hating its betrayal but knowing it was all true anyway.

"Now the only thing I want to hear about now is this *kiss* of yours!" he said, his voice growing louder again. There was no way David and Nicole *couldn't* hear this, and Christine was beyond mortified. But Raoul ploughed on.

"I just think that in all this time, you could've *mentioned* something about it. Something about the fact that while I was about to die on the floor, you two were sticking your tongues down each others' throats. It must've been really romantic."

"Stop," she finally murmured. She would not remember *that kiss* like that. No matter what Raoul said, she could not regret it.

But he ignored her. "Is that why he left? You gave him the action that he wanted and then that was it? You know, I never really understood why we got out until now. And for the past month I was afraid that he would come back for us. But nope! You gave him what he wanted, and he let us go. That is such a story. You're a hero, Christine."

There was an eternal silence that followed his last cruel, sarcastic statement. It felt as if the whole house was quiet, waiting to see what they would say next, and Christine felt her eyes swimming with tears. She wiped at them hurriedly and then said softly, "I'll go. I'll call a taxi and leave."

"You're just going to *go*?" He was shouting again. "Judas priest, Christine! Of *course* I don't deserve an explanation from you! Of *course* you're just going to run away instead of actually talk to me about what happened to us! No explanation necessary! No reason to try to explain why a masked man trapped us and nearly strangled me to death! Just go, then!"

That was it. She burst into tears, picked up her bags, and ran into her room, slamming the door shut behind her. She had to wait a few minutes before she was coherent enough to make a call for a taxi, and then she gathered her things, sobbing. She cried even harder as she pulled out the wrinkled envelope and looked at the note.

For therapy, relocation, hypnosis, or whatever else you may require to help you forget. I am sorry.

She was sorry, too. And she wanted therapy. She wanted a relocation and hypnosis. She wanted to forget.

After making sure she had not left anything, she slung her heavy bags over her shoulders and picked up her guitar, trying to wipe at her streaming eyes. She could feel some sand in her shoes as she opened the door and stepped out. The note was still on the floor, and she picked it up and pushed it into her pocket. It seemed to burn her fingers.

Trying to be quiet, she left the hallway and went down the stairs. Even if the taxi wasn't there yet, she would wait for it on the curb. She couldn't stay in this house any longer.

"Christine!"

She looked to see Nicole standing there, a worried frown on her lips. David stood behind her in a bathrobe, looking uncertain.

"Sweetheart, what in the world are you doing?"

"I have t-to go," Christine said, knowing it was useless to try to hide her tears. "Thank you so, so much f-for everything. I loved Hawaii." She brushed some tears away and reached into her purse, fishing around for the envelope. "I c-can pay you back for the p-plane ticket. Here..."

"No!" Nicole said, shaking her head emphatically and hurrying over. "Don't you dare! It was a gift to you. But—but Christine. You said you're going? It's the middle of the night!"

"I have a taxi coming for me," Christine said. "And I have enough money, so d-don't worry."

"But where will you go?" Nicole looked close to tears as well, and it made Christine feel even guiltier for all of the unkind thoughts she might have had toward Nicole. Her tears redoubled and began falling again.

"I have my apartment down by c-campus," Christine said, sniffing. That was technically a lie. Her new lease didn't start for another four days, but there was no reason for Nicole to know that.

"No! Sweetheart, that's a four hour drive! You can't make that this late at night!" She looked around to her husband. "David, tell her she can't go!"

David cleared his throat gruffly, obviously unsettled by all that had happened. Most likely he had been looking forward to a peaceful night after a long day of traveling, and Christine felt even worse for causing them so much trouble, even as she was leaving in order to give them *less* trouble.

"Look, Raoul might have said some...things that weren't nice," David said. "But Nicole's right. You shouldn't leave this late."

"Right," Nicole agreed. "I know you and Raoul are having a fight right now, but if you sleep on it, you'll both feel so much better in the morning. He's going to apologize to you once he gets some sleep. He's always been like this, you know, ever since he was a kid."

It was all making Christine cry harder. No matter how much sleep he got, Raoul would never forget the letter he read. She wondered if he had taken a picture of it with his phone, maybe to read over when he was especially angry about all that had happened to him.

"I'm so, so sorry about everything," Christine said, trying to keep her voice intelligible. "I'm so sorry for all I've d-done to Raoul. None of it sh-should have happened to him. It's all my fault. But I need to g-go."

"We can call Raoul down here, and maybe you two could talk some more?" Nicole suggested pleadingly. "Try to clear some of this up before you make any rash decisions?"

Christine shook her head quickly. "No. It's...I'll be fine. Thanks again f-for everything you've done for me." She went to the door and struggled to open it with her bags and guitar, but eventually she was stepping out into the calm summer night. To her relief, she could see the lights of the taxi waiting for her at the end of the driveway, and she gave one final glance to David and Nicole standing in the doorway watching her, not expecting to see Raoul but still hurt beyond belief that he was not there. Then she hurried as best she could to the car, throwing her things in the trunk and climbing in.

Thankfully, the taxi driver didn't comment on her obvious tears or the fact that she was running to his car with several bags in the middle of the night. He just asked where she wanted to go.

"A hotel," she said, wiping at her wet face. "Anywhere that's close by with vacancies."

Thirty minutes later, she was dragging her bags into a moderately-priced hotel room. She put her things in the corner, went to the large bed, and sank into it, sobbing.

Chapter 7: Chapter 7

The words kept blurring in front of her eyes, and she had to blink several times to bring them into focus. A dull noise was surrounding her, but she couldn't really distinguish any of the actual words being said. Another blink, and she was able to squint and actually read what was on the paper.

Please take a few moments to introduce yourself to your group. Remember that you will be working with them all semester, so it is important to discover the dynamics and strengths of your group early on in the semester.

And her group was busy chatting about what they had done over the summer.

Christine blinked again and rubbed her eyes, looking back up to the four other girls. They had gathered in the upper right-hand corner of the classroom and were all happily talking about the vacations they had gone on or the fun summer jobs they had held.

"I was working at this beautiful lake all summer. I went swimming every day, and I got an amazing tan. And it didn't hurt that my co-worker was a six-foot-something sexy grad student."

All the other girls giggled and asked more questions. Christine could feel her stomach churning. She almost felt sick now. After this girl was done talking about hooking up with the sexy grad student, the attention would turn to Christine, because she was the next in the circle. And Christine could just imagine what she could say.

Oh, this summer? I was manipulated, abused, and held prisoner by a deformed madman. But don't worry! I met up with my best friend from childhood. He was really amazing. We were going to get married. Now? Oh...he broke up with me. Why? Because I might be in love with the psycho who almost killed him. I don't know.

If she got up to use the bathroom, would they be done by the time she got back? Maybe it would be too late for them to ask her. But...if she was really going to work with them all semester, she didn't want to start out being the weird, quiet, awkward one.

There had been some media coverage about the whole thing. Christine wasn't sure how much of it had traveled up to her university, but she prayed that it was minimal. New York was always full of crime, and girls were threatened and abused by jealous men all the time...She had done her best to make the story as unsensational as possible when talking to the police, and they had obviously not been happy with her about it all.

Miss Daae, are you sure that's everything? We don't even have a last name...

I'm sorry. He never told it to me. But...but that's everything. I've answered everything I could.

But his apartment? Where he might have gone? You didn't really give us a good physical description, either. Just that he has some facial abnormalities. Those could be key in locating him and bringing him to justice.

Then Raoul had cut in as best he could, angrily waving his hands because his throat was still healing. He was upset because they were pressuring her and she was still so traumatized and couldn't think clearly. Couldn't they see that? Christine hadn't corrected him.

"What about you? What's your name?"

Christine blinked and looked to see a pretty girl with dark hair smiling at her. "Did you do anything fun this summer?"

"Oh." Christine swallowed nervously. "I...um. Just worked. Nothing fun. My name's Christine, by the way."

Then they asked where she had worked. *Just at a business in town. Office job, you know...*

And then it was short-lived relief as the class ended. Christine shoved her syllabus and notebook into her backpack and stood, filing behind several other students as they trickled out onto the sunny campus.

The second day of the new semester. And it was already torture. She squinted against the bright morning sun, trying to remember where her next class was. It was a university required class, some sort of physical science, and she trudged along and found it in a badly-lit room with old, battered desks. She took a seat near the back, miserable beyond belief.

She had stayed in that hotel for three days. The first day she hadn't even gotten out of the bed and had mindlessly stared at the television, watching home improvement and cooking shows. She had used them as excuses to cry throughout the day as families were given new homes and restaurants were given remodeled kitchens. It was all ridiculous, but she had sobbed on and off for hours.

The next morning, she had ventured out in search of food, had found a sandwich shop in walking distance, and had brought two sandwiches back to her room to last the next two days. It had been awful. Once, she had pulled out her battered old laptop from her bag and opened a couple of Raoul's social media accounts. She didn't know what she expected to see...Maybe some vague post about betrayal or heartbreak, but he hadn't posted anything for over a month. But that wasn't really new, either. She knew he rarely updated his accounts. There was a new picture of them in Hawaii, though, posted by Nicole several days ago, and Christine had teared up looking at it. He hadn't taken it down, so maybe...

After another day, she had left the hotel, using some of the cash Erik had given her to pay for it, and then she had taken another taxi all the way up to her university, staring out of the window for hours, refusing to cry or even think about what had happened. There was no point in doing so, was there? No point in sobbing over what had happened in the past. Only the future was to come, now. A future of two more years of university, then entering into the workplace, completely unprepared and unknowing of what she actually wanted to do.

No. She knew what she wanted to do, and she swallowed harshly at the thought. She had already had glimpses of her dream. The applause of the audience and the feeling of the music had only made her yearn for it all the more. And *he* had known that. He had given her just a taste to lure her in, and it worked perfectly. She had taken the bait wholeheartedly, without a second thought. And now she was paying for it. Now she was completely alone and without direction or purpose in her life. *He* had taken everything from her. Everything.

Five Months Previously

"Erik?"

He had heard her before, heard the *click* of the door unlocking, the slight creak as it opened, the soft padding of her feet. And there she stood. She had come at an unexpected time, and so he was less put-together than he wished to be. The mask had been off...But at the first sound of her entrance, it had instantly been put back on. He looked and saw that she, too, appeared a little less formal than normal. He felt his breath catch in his throat, a stupid, immature gesture that he found himself doing often now.

"Erik?" she repeated, looking into the front room. "Are you still awake?" Her voice was a loud whisper.

"Of course," he replied. "But it is late. You should be sleeping."

"I know," she said, smiling a little at him and entering the room fully. "But I can't. I'm glad you're awake, though! Is it okay that I'm down here? Or do you want some privacy?"

"You are always welcome here," he said. "At anytime."

Her smile widened, and she took a few steps closer, sitting down in the chair he normally used. She looked radiant but somehow different. Perhaps it was the time of day...it changed her features into something even softer, more inviting. He felt his stomach twist.

"I just tossed and turned forever," she said. "Maybe I had too much sugar today. I'm glad you're awake."

She said that a second time. Was she? Was she glad? Or was that simply said in passing? How could she be so completely unaware of how small comments like that made his head spin? She had to be ignorant. The thought of her knowing what it all meant to him, how much control she actually had over him...It would be too cruel if she were to know and then use it this maliciously.

"I went to this little street fair thing that was going on downtown, and there was so much food there! And these amazing desserts." She beamed at him, obviously pleased with what she had done that day. "It was really fun. There were so many people! And such fun music. I wish you could've come."

That was undoubtedly a pretty lie, given to him out of pity. Ah...if only he could have been at her side, a glowering, hideous man spoiling such an outing for her. But he kept quiet.

"Raoul took me. Do you want to see some pictures?" She pulled out her phone, not waiting for his reply. "I took some to show you!" She stood and walked closer to him, and he tried not to feel ill. It was a delirious sickness...something in his mind and heart and gut that shut down whenever she was near. And then she leaned next to him slightly, holding out her phone for him to see. He could feel her long hair brushing against his shoulder.

"See? They had all this really good Korean food. I tried a bunch of different stuff. Oh, here's one of me eating a crazy crab thing."

Her delicate face was scrunched up in the picture, obviously displeased by what she had just tasted, and he had to restrain himself from snatching the phone out of her hands and keeping every picture she had of herself. Instead he listened quietly as she chattered on about the various foods and trinkets she had seen. She even said that she had brought some things back for *him*. What a bizarre, delightful girl.

"Oh, here's one of me and Raoul. He makes the funniest faces! Look."

All pleasure at seeing pictures of her vanished. Instead he was forced to stare at a disgustingly-handsome young man. And the man's arm was around Christine in the picture. And Christine was looking at him in the picture, smiling widely...*happily...lovingly*.

He stood suddenly, his head reeling.

"Erik? What's wrong?"

Everything seemed to rush into him at once. It was jealousy...and rage...and disappointment...and a crushing, debilitating despair. He felt hunched over, like some horrible monster lurking in his cave, and he wished to crawl into some black hole and curl up like a disgusting spider and breathe through this pain. He did not want her to see it. But then he did.

He did not reply for several long moments, taking the time to breathe deeply. A loss of control during this moment would not be ideal. He wished for her to always seek him out, to always come to him. It would not do to rage at her after she had come so willingly, after she had shared the events of her day, after she had been near him physically and had laughed around him. No. He wanted that always. But he did not want...*that boy*.

"Who is that?" he finally managed to ask, his voice quiet, controlled.

"Raoul? I told you about him." She sounded confused, and she looked at him, her brows bent in concern. "He was my best friend when we were little. I told you, Erik...Remember? I said I had bumped into him in the city! He's going to school here."

A pause. He did remember. Her words came back to him, just a few days earlier.

Guess what, Erik? I ran into my childhood best friend the other day! Isn't the world so small?

How wonderful for you, my darling. It must be quite exciting to have friends.

Oh, Erik, we're friends. It makes me sad when you say stuff like that. Anyway, we're going to go out and catch up on Friday afternoon. Is that okay?

Of course. So long as you are careful and promise to return at a decent hour.

He had let her go that afternoon, sending her out with a car and a driver with instructions to take her wherever she desired but also to remain close by to keep an eye on her. He had assumed that her *best friend* from childhood would be female. Mostly he had been distracted by her proclamation that *they* were friends. Of course it had thrilled him. But it had sickened him. To be mere *friends* with the only thing he had ever loved on this whole planet...and he wanted so much more. He was greedy, insatiable. And he could not stop himself.

"You're making me nervous," Christine admitted, bringing him back to the present. She did indeed look worried. "Did I do something to make you mad?"

"You have done nothing wrong," he forced himself to say, his teeth practically clenched shut. "I am merely...tired." A stupid lie, an excuse that anyone could see

right through. "It has been a long day. I am pleased to see that you have enjoyed yourself, though."

"Yeah, it really was fun," she said, appearing relieved by his explanation. She looked back at the pictures, smiling at them. He wished to take the phone and smash it to the ground and her memories of her *childhood best friend* with it. He would have bet his right hand that the boy in the picture also had hopes of more than a friendship with her. Those disgusting blue eyes said so as they looked at her. It was obvious, even in a mere picture.

"Will you see him again?" He could not stop himself from asking that.

"Well..." She sounded hesitant, obviously sensing his anger. He did his best to quell it. She continued quietly, "Um...I wanted to. It's been years since we've seen each other...I just wanted to catch up."

"Yes. That is natural." He could stop her from seeing that boy again, he supposed. But...she was not his prisoner here. And the music pulled her in like nothing else could. He wanted to win her as any other man, fairly, so that they could both live easily and blissfully knowing that they had come together and had found happiness the way every other couple had ever done so.

She looked even more worried now, but he continued: "Of course you may. I am not here to hold you prisoner in this city. I wish for you to experience it and enjoy yourself."

The smile that she then gave him almost made those lies worth it. Almost.

"Wow! Thank you, Erik. That means so much to me! And Raoul will be so happy. It's been so long since we've seen each other. And I promise that I'll always be back here for lessons and I'll work so hard."

"Yes. That is of utmost importance to me." He watched her carefully, ensuring that his tone was even. "Your voice is our prime reason for your little sojourn into city life, is it not? Therefore you must be careful to continue working and not get caught up in the city itself or its...inhabitants."

"I promise, Erik," she said, so earnestly that he did believe her for a moment. Then his natural, brooding suspicion took hold, but she repeated herself. "I promise I'll work really hard these next few months."

After another few minutes, she left him, saying she was going to try to sleep now, and she had said that he should do the same. He had said that he would try, an outright lie, but she had seemed pleased by this response. It was difficult to stop lying to her when she looked so very content with the lies he spun for her.

Several hours later, when the entire building was silent, he was alive, and he entered her apartment, inhaling the air that was imbued with her scent, seeing her personal items scattered about. There was a sweater on the sofa, two pairs of her shoes by the door, a picture of her father on a table...She had made this her own space, and it pleased him beyond measure. The bedroom door was half-shut, and he crept through, his heart pounding loudly.

Her breathing was soft and even, and he kept his eyes carefully on her as he approached. For some reason, it thrilled him that she left her hair down as she slept. She was curled up on her side, her face soft and carefree, and he longed to slip in beside her and breathe her in, caress her hair and feel her curves. Instead he picked up the phone that was resting on the table next to her and entered the passcode that he had long since memorized.

The pictures came first. And there were almost two dozen of them, some of her, some of him, some of them together. His hand shook as he stared, seeing her happy face. She looked radiant in the sun, and they looked radiant together. They were well-matched; both young and vibrant, both attractive people. Nothing could have been worse. Had this boy been ill-matched, perhaps *he* could have persuaded her to abandon him. He would have believed it himself. But he knew, in parts of himself that he refused to ever acknowledge, that they were perfectly-matched. And had the boy been less than upstanding, he could have rightly and justifiably refused to let her see him again. But there was an innocence in his gaze that was mirrored in Christine's, and *he* hated it.

Then he went over to her messaging history. The two had messaged back and forth until two in the morning. He looked back at her, outraged, incensed. Even the sight of her little pink mouth and slender fingers resting beside her on the pillow could not soothe him. The desire to crush that stupid phone, to incinerate it, to blast it into oblivion was raging through him. He opened the screen and read their most recent messages.

I still can't believe you ate that pig thing!

Hey, whatever I can do to impress you right lol

Well consider me impressed then lol. It looked soooooo gross

Are you impressed enough by my bravery to see me again sometime soon?

Lol yes! I'd love to! Just not in the mornings. I have practice then.

They then arranged a time and place for the upcoming weekend, and *he* knew then that he could not let her go, could not let her see him again, no matter what he had said. He was losing her already, through these photos, through these messages.

The most recent ones were from him.

You still there?

You must have fallen asleep lol

Sorry for keeping you up late! You'll get these in the morning I guess.

Have a good day Christine! Can't wait to see you again :)

He wanted to reply and tell this...*Raoul de Chagny* that they would never see each other again and that he was not to contact her. But of course that could not happen. Instead he put the phone back down and left, not allowing himself to look at her, afraid that he would hurt her in his anger. She did not know what she was doing. She was young and naive. And she had not been with him long. How could she know how *he* felt when he was still so careful around her?

He had hoped so many things. He had wanted her feelings to develop over the course of their months together. There had been no need for her to learn of his infatuation, his...*obsession*. If things had gone according to his plan, they would have been happily married in a matter of months, with no need for threats, pleas, or unmaskings of any kind. This boy was ruining it all, while *he* simply stood around and hoped for Christine to suddenly discover any sort of affection for him.

Back down in his own apartments, he sat at his desk, glowering at the wall, a glass of brandy sitting before him, untouched. He had never been a *passive* individual. He no longer allowed things to happen without any of his own input or control. And he knew now that his plans would have to be changed. He could not simply sit idly by and allow Christine to become enraptured by this boy, by their shared nostalgia. He had worked too long for this. An idiotic schoolboy would not best him.

He watched her carefully over the next two days, looking for any signs of distraction. Faint lines appeared beneath her eyes, and he commented on them.

"Are you not sleeping well, Christine? Is it too cold for you, perhaps? Too warm?"

"No, it's perfect!" she said. "I don't know why I look so tired. Maybe I'll try to go to bed earlier or something."

The late-night messaging had not stopped. He had checked at four one morning and had found recent messages. His heart was continually racing, alternating between rage and a crushing sadness and an uncontrollable, fierce desire to find this Raoul de Chagny and eradicate him.

One morning, he brought her fresh fruit as she rested for a bit during their lesson. She smiled in thanks and chatted to him absentmindedly as she ate; a story about picking strawberries as a child, how she wished she wasn't so pale, how much she was enjoying the city. He knew that she and that boy had made arrangements to meet later that week, and he was silent as she chattered, a little bluebird, all sweetness and innocence.

"Perhaps you would enjoy the symphony this weekend," he then suggested, watching her even more carefully.

"When?" she asked, looking excited.

"They have a rather well-chosen selection for Friday evening," he said, noticing how her fingers paused as she picked up a cherry. "Would you care to go?"

A moment of silence came, and she put some fruit in her mouth to stall for time. He continued to stare, knowing that her little brain was working furiously, trying to decide what to do. She put another few cherries in her mouth, staring at the bowl of fruit. He was not going to decide for her this time. He wished to see what she would do.

Finally, she swallowed and looked back at him, smiling, though it was not fully genuine. "I'd love to go, Erik. Thanks for inviting me."

Hours later, he crept back into the room, doing his best to ignore the fact that a few of her more intimate clothing articles were scattered on the floor. She sighed in her sleep as he picked up the phone, as if unconsciously disapproving of his actions.

That was no matter. She would immediately disapprove consciously as well.

The boy was clearly disappointed that she canceled their plans.

Really? Aw man. I had a cool night planned

I'm so sorry! :(Can we do it another night?

A band I like is playing Friday night only at a bar close by my apartment. I think you'd like them. I wish you could come :(

Me too. I like the symphony and all, but I'd rather hang out with you

Can't you just tell him that you don't want to go?

I just don't want him to get mad at me. It's kinda complicated. He's the best teacher ever, and I really need his help if I wanna sing. I'm sure he thinks the symphony will help me develop my inner ear better or learn to appreciate the classics more or something like that lol

He sounds a little crazy to me. No offense lol

Lol. He is a little crazy. But lots of really talented people are

Haha fair point. But we're definitely going to do something next week, k?

Yay! Can't wait xoxox

It was all unraveling faster than he had anticipated, and as he stood there, phone in hand, watching his deceptive, beautiful, perfect, treacherous little girl sleep peacefully beneath her white comforter, he realized that none of it would ever happen the way he had so foolishly hoped.

***Chapter 8*: Chapter 8**

It was raining in Budapest.

The rain was spurred on by a chilling autumn wind, and it seemed to soak straight through his clothing, through his minimal flesh, and settle onto his bones. There was nothing to be done for this, however. He simply stood there, waiting, letting the rain trickle down his neck, into his shoes, and beneath his mask.

At least he wasn't on that train any longer. He could still feel his teeth chattering occasionally from that accursed trip. It had been successful, though, for however horrid it had been. He had passed through much of Europe undetected and unknown. His eastward journey stopped here, however. Eastern Europe was overrun with people he would rather not see again. A trip into Russia would be practically suicide. No, south would be more suitable. To Istanbul and then perhaps onto Cairo...

Feeling the phone in his pocket buzzing, he answered immediately.

"Well?"

"How are you enjoying the weather?"

He was unamused. "Simply tell me if you have it or not."

"I told you that you could come stay with me in London. The weather isn't much better here, but at least you'd have an actual bed to sleep in."

"As charming as your cockroach-infested, squalid flat sounded, I was unfortunately forced to deny your invitation. Enough. Tell me if you have it or not so that I may leave this wretched city."

A sigh from the other end. "Of course I do. But anytime you feel like coming back to civilization after your safari into the wild, my offer still stands. Where are you going again? Cameroon?"

"Why should I tell you? I wish to die in privacy, decaying away somewhere untraceable from an untreatable tropical disease. That is all I want in my life. Solitude sometimes is best society."

A laugh, then. "No, no, you're too dramatic for that. You will let yourself get mauled by some wild animal."

"Whatever happens, at least you will not be there." He grabbed the small bag he had put underneath a piece of moldy cardboard and then began to walk down the alleyway, saying, "I will wire you the money before I depart. Goodbye." And he hung up.

Once he was back in the putrid room he had been inhabiting for two days, he took off the mask and breathed deeply, feeling the water still dripping from his fingertips onto the floor, attempting to suppress a wave of delicious, tormenting, painful memories.

Why are you drenched? I told you to bring an umbrella!

Oh, I'm sorry, Erik. I forgot it when I left, and then of course Raoul and I got caught in the storm when we were in the park...

What?! I told you not to see that boy again! I told you—ah! I see you lifting that perfect little chin of yours. You think that you can flagrantly disobey Erik?

I went to see Raoul today because I don't think it's right that you said I can't see him. You're not my father.

No—no, of course I am not. I would never want to be that...I am your teacher, however, and this boy is distracting—

Erik! Raoul's not a distraction. He's just a friend! Why do you hate him so much?

Perhaps he should have killed that perfect interloper the moment he saw the pictures on her phone. But he had been a fool. He had let them continue, warning her against any romantic attachments, then telling her to cut off all ties with him, threatening her if she disobeyed. And then locking her up.

I love you. I love you. How can I allow you to see him when I know you love that boy? I love you. How could I not?

She had cried as he professed his love for her, as he swore his devotion to her. The memory of it burned. He had pressed his horrid face into her legs as he knelt before her, wrapping his arms around her, breathing in her scent and worshiping every soft inch of flesh and smooth skin.

Please, Erik...Stop!

Stop what? Stop loving you? That is impossible. I am your slave. Do with me as you will. Only do not leave me. I do not want to see your tears. I do not want to make you my prisoner. But what else can I do? I will always be second to that boy of yours unless I keep you here.

He did not regret that, even in retrospect. What else could he have done? Had he let her go during that time, she would have run off, undoubtedly married that boy...

Yet in the aftermath of it all, it did not matter. It was inevitable, and perhaps he had known that all along but had forced himself to deny it for as long as possible. They were married now, weren't they? He had seen that picture of the two of them on a beach somewhere. She had looked...exquisite. And all he had done was become a black stain on her perfect soul. That's all he had been to her; some parasite, a leech, sucking away at her goodness. He would forever be remembered as the monster who had terrified them and had then run away. He would be her nightmare, and she would remain his waking dream. He had touched perfection, been kissed by perfection...It should have been enough for him, yet he sat there, greedy and lecherous, thinking of her and wishing for so much more.

"Overall, I was happy with the average score. A few of you could do with some more studying, though."

Christine stared at her test as she listened to the professor. A large red 57% was scrawled over the top of it. An F. She had actually failed an exam. That had never happened before. Of course she had never had perfect grades, but she had always been a good student. This semester, though...she just couldn't do it. All of her classes were suffering, but this returned test was solid evidence that something was wrong. It was physical proof in her hand that she was not okay.

She pushed it into her bag, hoping no one sitting near her had seen her score, and was grateful when the professor dismissed them a bit early. The class chattered around her as they all gathered their things, and she swung her backpack around her shoulders and left without a word.

It was bizarre to her that life kept...going. She got up in the mornings, ate cereal, went to classes, did homework, took walks sometimes, and talked to her roommate, who had even convinced her to go to a university football game once. Christine had gotten sunburned and hadn't enjoyed it.

Despite the normalness around her, the normalness of the things she did during the day, things were still *not* normal, and it always manifested itself in different, unexpected, jarring ways. Her roommate, Rebecca, had obviously done some research online after they met, because within a week of the semester, she had asked Christine about what had happened over the summer.

"Oh, it was just...stupid," Christine had stuttered, trying hard not to feel angry and exposed and cornered but still feeling all of those things. "I had this...um, this guy. He really liked me but was mad I was interested in another guy. They got into a fight. It was so dumb. I'm...actually embarrassed that they even wrote anything about it."

"It said that your boyfriend almost died!" Rebecca had said, eyes wide as she ate her sandwich at the kitchen table.

"That's not true," Christine said, trying to pour her cereal as quickly as possible and escape to her room. "It was exaggerated. I guess that's just how press is, haha..."

There was no need to correct Rebecca about Raoul being her current boyfriend. Christine didn't want anymore speculation or gossip or internet research. She had a funny feeling that that was the kind of stuff Rebecca loved. Even if her roommate didn't believe her watered-down story, that was the one Christine was going to stick with.

Still, Rebecca was nice enough, and there were no parties or boys sleeping over, so that was enough for Christine at the moment. She had considered getting her own apartment several times, but maybe next semester she would look into it more—now that she had enough money thanks to *him*. She had finally deposited the cash into a few different bank accounts, but it simply sat there. Really, what would she do with it all? Even with her few student loans paid off, she still had nearly all of it left. She continued to look into charities occasionally, but it was always half-hearted. And was it awful that she had used his money to pay for hotel rooms and debt when she had no idea where it came from?

Christine shook her head as she walked into her apartment. Nothing made sense. There didn't seem to be any answers to the questions that plagued her, because most of the questions were for him and about him. And he was the only one who could answer them all.

After grabbing a banana from the kitchen, Christine retreated to her bedroom and pulled out her laptop, hoping to do some homework but knowing that she wouldn't be able to. Instead, she went to her social media pages, perfectly aware that she would just mindlessly scroll through the feed for a while until it became too much. However, to her surprise, there was a message waiting for her, and when she pulled it up, her stomach dropped.

It was from Raoul.

It had been weeks, and there had been nothing. She had been tempted a few times to text him or message him, but she had never been able to do it. And now this message...sitting plaintively in front of her. Taking a breath and closing her eyes for a moment, she then began to read, her throat dry, her stomach twisting.

Hey Christine,

I know this is kind of out of the blue, but it's important to me to send this. I hope your semester is going well. New York is still so hot right now. Sometimes I pass by the places we went to together. I really did have such a great time with you this summer, and I'll always remember that and all the fun we had as kids. I needed you more than you know after my parents died and I moved over here.

I'm so sorry for how I acted the night you left. We were both so tired, I think, and we weren't thinking clearly. You deserved better than to have left in the middle of the night. I shouldn't have yelled at you, either. That's something I'll always regret. Maybe we should have waited until the next morning to talk.

But I honestly don't think that would have changed a lot. Sorry, Christine. I'm seriously so confused by that letter you wrote. You said that you're still confused, too, so this time is good for both of us. We both need to figure this whole thing out. I just wanted to say sorry for how I treated you the night you left, and I hope that everything works out for you in your last couple years of school. Don't be ashamed of asking for help. I saw a therapist again once a week this past month, and it's really helped me, especially in writing this.

You'll always be that best friend I needed when we were kids, and I'm really happy that we got to catch up again this summer. I know you'll finish school and do awesome things. Thanks for everything, Christine.

She thought she would cry, but she didn't.

Christine reread the letter several more times, her stomach churning and her mouth dry, yet no tears came. The letter was it. There was no invitation to contact him, to reply, to ever meet up with him again if she happened to be in New York. It was over. She had known that the night she had left the house, but the message was a reconfirmation. It was a fresh wave of disappointment and hurt.

Raoul had been the reason she had fought so hard against Erik. Raoul had been the reason she had *had* to fight so hard. Before Raoul, Erik had always let her do whatever she wanted. But it only took one outing with her childhood friend to force Erik to show his possessiveness and volatility. It had been frightening. Yet...she was somehow glad. She had seen every side of that broken man and had been the receiver of his wrath, his rage, his love, his yearnings, and his hopes. She had known before seeing Raoul again that Erik was not perfect, yet it was only when her relationship with Raoul began to develop that Erik had ripped away any coverings or disguises he had constructed and let himself be who he really was; angry, confused, dangerous, desperate...

She had seen everything, and she had still cared about him during those final minutes. And finally, it had been enough.

Yet it wasn't anymore. During the initial hours afterward, sitting in police station rooms, answering questions, being constantly barraged with warm drinks and food, Christine had thought that it was all over. She and Raoul had not made it out uninjured, but they were actually alive, and for a time, she hadn't thought they would be alive at the end of it. Then, she had been satisfied with it all. But now Raoul was gone, and...

Really, how much was left? The message from Raoul had taken away the faint hope and wonder if they would ever find their way back to one another. Maybe he was right. But...no matter how confused she was, she did still care for him. She had loved him. Maybe the love had changed, and not for the better, but the attachment was still there.

There was no one to tell any of this to, and so the next evening when her roommate asked her how Christine's week was going, she just shrugged noncommittally, not bothering to mention what she had done earlier that day.

Christine had been nervous in the office, trying to clear her thoughts and straightening a little in her chair as the man returned and sat across from her. He watched her through his thick-rimmed glasses. Feeling uncomfortable, she instead stared at her lap, waiting for him to say something. They were in a small cubicle, and there was a general air of office chaos around them; phones ringing, footsteps, conversations, questions...Christine felt isolated, though. The man behind the desk didn't look to be very old—maybe only a couple years older than she was. Maybe he was a graduate student working part-time at the office. Or maybe he had just graduated and had taken the first job at the university that he could.

"We're really sorry to see you go, Christine," he said. "Is there any way I could change your mind?"

She shook her head. "I need this," she said quietly. "It won't be forever, though. I just need to...get some things sorted out."

"We have resources on campus," he pressed. "Counseling and stuff for students who've gone through traumatic experiences. Have you looked into that at all?"

"I've already been to therapy," she said, blushing brightly. "It's...I'm fine. I've got help. I think I need a little more time before...starting everything again."

The guy behind the desk nodded. "Totally understandable. The dean of your college was really understanding when the situation was explained. Man...stalked by an obsessed psycho. I'd need to get away, for sure, if that ever happened to me!"

He was trying to help, she knew. Maybe he thought he was being funny, so she gave a weak smile to not be rude.

"Well, let us know if we can help you in the future," he said, picking up her accepted leave of absence application. "We're always available if you need any extra help. And hey—you applied just in time. If you had waited another week, all your dropped classes would've been put on your transcript. So good job on that!"

She forced another smile and a small laugh. "Heh. Good." Then picking up her copy of the application, she left the buzzing office, feeling more relieved and more terrified than before.

No. Christine didn't want to tell anyone about that. But it felt freeing to no longer be worried about projects, exams, or assignments. That afternoon, she had put all of her textbooks into a box and shoved it under her bed before sitting on it and staring at the guitar that was propped up in the corner. The last time she had touched it, she had been back with *him*...And it felt different, now, almost like it had betrayed her in some ways.

She walked over and grabbed the case, clicking open the latches and pulling up the lid. It was a classic dreadnought, seemingly ordinary-looking. She ran her fingers over the strings and plucked one. It was out of tune, and she grimaced a little.

It had been her father's.

Why she had wanted to learn the guitar, she wasn't really sure. Her father had played a variety of string instruments; violin, banjo, mandolin, bass guitar, and he had even picked up a ukulele and had learned several chords. One of her earliest memories was sitting next to him in a park, listening while he played his acoustic guitar for her and sang in his rough baritone. Maybe that was why she had become so attached and had adamantly insisted on being taught.

She was nowhere near as good as her father had been. Picking it up, the weight familiar, she held it against her lap, slowly beginning to tune, using the fifth fret to check. When it was back in tune, she began to strum, almost absentmindedly, her fingers moving over the strings and frets easily. Chords had always been her favorite. Her father had tried to teach her how to fingerpick, but she had only learned a few basic patterns.

Her eyes closed, and she played a few songs, her heart pounding and her mind full.

Why did you stop?

I don't know...I'm just...I'm not as good as you.

That does not mean you are not talented, my dear. I enjoyed listening to you. And besides, the guitar has never been my forte.

You say that about everything, but you're the best at everything I've heard you play!

You flatter me. Please. Continue. And you will sing now, yes? Play something and sing.

Will you sing with me?

Only if you wish.

Christine realized she had never played for Raoul. She had started to learn after he had transferred schools, and it had never come up during their summer together. Her music had always and only been for and with...Erik. It had been what had drawn them together in the first place, anyway.

Wondering if her voice was still usable after so many weeks of silence, she hummed softly, not wanting her roommate to hear. It felt weaker, naturally, but still there, like shimmering, glowing coals, ready and waiting for something to latch onto and become bright and alive. What was it waiting for?

The prospect of never really singing again made her sick to her stomach. At the same time, all music would now be forever tied up with memories of *him*. Before, it had been memories of her father, of their time together and the music they had made. But now Erik had inserted himself into those feelings, and she had let him. She had practically invited him in! How could she sing and do what she really loved while always confronting and thinking of those painful, awful, beautiful memories of their time together?

Her therapist had always said that she needed to express her feelings somehow, and before she had always been able to do that through her music. Now that there was no music in her life, everything was kept inside, and it was painful. It felt like some sort of dam, and the pressure was growing, but there was no way to relieve it.

After a while, she stopped strumming and simply sat there, the guitar in her lap, the wood warm now. She leaned forward and rested her cheek against it, simply sitting there, breathing, trying to think and feeling unable to. There was so much to think of and yet she kept telling herself that there really wasn't anything left. She had been taken advantage of and held prisoner by a psychopathic genius, had been let go, and had broken up with her boyfriend. There. Simple.

Yet weeks—months—had passed, and there were still so many things she didn't understand.

What are you doing? I don't understand...

I have told you. It is over. You are free.

But I said I'd go with you! I told you I would marry you!

No. It is...No. You must leave with him. And you will never see me again, I promise you.

But...

She had been so dazed by everything and so overwhelmed, so she had simply sat down, feeling faint and nauseous. Raoul was lying beside her, barely conscious, his breath rattling and painful-sounding. His neck was raw and bleeding, and it was only when a paramedic grabbed her and shined a flashlight into her eyes that she realized that Erik was gone, and somehow the police had found them.

Setting her guitar aside, Christine went back to the bed, pulling her laptop close, her fingers hovering over the keys. She swallowed painfully, thinking of what was nestled in the bottom of her jewelry box and feeling dread and excitement and longing wash over her. With shaking fingers, she slowly typed in *tickets to New York City*.

***Chapter 9*: Chapter 9**

Thank you so much for all of the insightful, thoughtful reviews. Seriously. I know this story isn't what most people like to read (because EC aren't together in each and every chapter), so I didn't expect a lot of feedback, but the reviews you are posting are so kind and encouraging. Really. Thank you.

Name: Erik ?

Birthplace: ?

Birthday: ?

Family: ?

Significant Life Events: ?

Christine put the end of the pen in her mouth, staring at the incomplete list. Should she put anything under the last category? Maybe *fell obsessively in love with Christine Daae in New York City...*

She shook her head and decided to leave it blank for now. Of course there were countless other things she wanted to find out; countries he had visited, languages he spoke, friends he might have, what other talents and interests he held, what he had always wanted out of life...There were too many, and she knew she wouldn't find the answer to everything in New York. She was just hoping that technical details could be found.

The taxi was warm, and she looked up, squinting through the rain-splashed window. They were still a few minutes away, and already she was starting to grow nervous. With a deep breath, she put her notebook and pen back into the bag, still a little unbelieving that she was back here.

She had told her roommate that there was some family business she had to take care of, not bothering to mention just where she was going or how long she would be away. Christine hadn't planned for longer than a couple days, but the fact was, she didn't really have anything drawing her back to the university or her shared apartment. There were no more classes or deadlines, definitely no dating prospects, and no close friends. Had she wanted, she could probably stay in New York for several months, but that thought was nerve-wracking for a number of reasons.

The sidewalks were empty and soaked, and the upscale apartment buildings loomed over them. Christine glanced around and then said quickly,

"Just right here, please."

The car pulled along the curb, and she handed over some bills. The driver gave her a grin as he took them.

"Good luck out there, lady."

Christine merely gave a half-smile in response and then climbed out of the warm, dry car and out into the drenched, freezing street. Rain was coming down in sheets, and she pulled her hood up over her head, wishing she had thought to bring better shoes or even an umbrella. Cars splashed noisily along the street, honking at the occasional miserable pedestrian and other cars. Christine stood there for a moment, trying to gather herself. She already felt so overwhelmed being back here, being so close...

Clutching her bag tightly, she set off, her legs oddly stiff. Walking back to this place willingly, where so many awful things had happened; what was wrong with her? But it was too late now. She was two minutes away. For some reason, she had been too nervous to have the taxi driver take her all the way. And now she was getting soaked. Still, it was better this way. If something happened, she would be able to simply keep walking or change directions and pretend to be heading somewhere else. She didn't know what *would* happen, but it made her anxious all the same.

The memories were coming now, and she wouldn't be able to stop them all. The first time *he* brought her here...

Here we are, my dear.

Here? I thought I was just going to be in a hotel.

No. Only the finest for my little songbird. You have a small apartment here. Nothing too grand, but I do hope you will enjoy it.

But Erik, where will you stay if we're not in a hotel?

Ah. I will be where I belong. Below.

She stood there, looking up at the building. A tall, brick building with large windows and trees outside of it. The trees were starting to lose their leaves, a lot of them in the gutter, moldy and brown because of the rain. Christine took a few steps closer and then stopped again, shivering from the cold and from something else.

Erik, I feel bad that you always think you need to be here downstairs. You're always welcome to come up to my apartment.

Only angels dwell in such places. Creatures like I am must be content to live below them.

What do you mean? Half of the time I never really get what you're saying...

She was inside and out of the rain now, dripping onto the smooth floors as she made her way quickly across the entryway and down toward the seldom-used stairwell. Her heart was pounding fast, hard against her ribs. The stairwell was dim and cold, and she walked slowly, her breath coming faster and faster the farther down she went.

Then she was there. *There*. Looking around, seeing the ugly basement with the cleaning supplies and broken apartment fixtures and other useless junk. Painful memories came to her, and she sat down for a few minutes, trying to get herself to stop shaking. Stop crying.

Stop crying. Why must you always cry? You only cry for him. Never for Erik. Not for the hideous monster.

She was seeing *that night* all again. The eternal silence as she lay there next to Raoul, both of them dazed, silent, but for different reasons. The sudden noises as dozens of people rushed down and into the room, shining flashlights into their faces, shouting things at them, putting medical equipment on them and in them and lifting them onto stretchers. Pictures were being taken, people kept talking excitedly, pointing at her and then Raoul, and she had looked at him and started crying weakly. He was unconscious now, and a medical team was surrounding him. Someone kept stepping in front of her and saying, *Miss? Miss, can you hear me?*

With a shuddering breath, Christine wiped away a few lingering tears and then stood, already feeling exhausted. But there was still so much more. She made her way over to the wall, to the eternally-locked door, and she pushed a hand into her pocket, feeling the key that she had hidden in her jewelry box for months.

She had never told anyone about this. When asked by the police, she had said that they had always been in her apartment and that she had no idea where *he* actually lived. There was no mention of the fact that his apartment was less than twenty feet away from where they had been found, and that it was locked behind a door that required a special key and then a keycode password that he had given her. She suddenly realized now just how much trust he had put in her, and during her time with him she had accused him more than once of not trusting anyone.

With shaking fingers, she pulled out the key and pushed it in the lock. It twisted for her, and she stood there with a hand on the knob, swallowing, waiting. A slight beep came next to the door, and she punched in the code, holding her breath. If he had changed it during this time, there was no way she would be able to get in. He had told her once that if someone entered the incorrect code, the building would blow up. At first it had made her laugh, as she had thought he was only joking. Now, however, she had a horrible feeling that it might just be true...

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There was a *click*, the light turned green, and she felt the door unlock. All the air rushed out of her at once, and she felt her heart skip a beat as she twisted the knob and finally pushed the heavy door open.

The smell hit her first. It was musty, dank, and stale. The chill from the room seemed to freeze onto her already-wet clothing, and she continued to shiver as she stepped inside and flipped on a light.

Everything was there how she remembered. So maybe he hadn't returned. Not at all. Not even for the violin that sat plaintively on a table, dust coating it. It was heartbreaking to see. But then again, what had she expected? A warm, bright place waiting for her, sweets laid out in the front room...and *he* would be standing there, expecting her? No. That had never happened, not even when he had been there in the first place. It had always been a little dim, a little chilly.

It's always so cold down here! How can you stand it?

It suits me rather well, don't you think? No, do not answer. I shall warm it for you, of course.

The apartment had always been somewhat empty, with only the necessities: a sofa, a chair, a table...It had always confused her, because she had known that Erik was well-off. So why did he live down here, in the cold, with not very much stuff, when he could have afforded anything else?

The piano was still there, sitting in the corner, and she could see that a some of his books were gone, but many remained. Apparently he hadn't taken much time to pack; or maybe he hadn't really packed at all and had simply left the basement. Everything looked the same, familiar...but nothing felt that way.

She didn't want to linger for very long in the main rooms; she knew them well enough. With soft steps, she went toward *his* room, her breath gone. She had never seen it, not in all the time she had spent with him. He had prepared a room for her—a room she had called *Christine's Cell*, and he had actually laughed when she had taped a sign on the front of the door—but his room had never been spoken or mentioned between them. Of course she had been curious but never curious enough to actually ask him about it or try to pry. That was rude.

A horrid, horrible thought came over her as she began to open the door, and she shivered. *What if he...*

He had left the money for her, meaning he had been able enough to travel during the days before he had left it. But what if afterward...?

"Hello?" she whispered, goosebumps prickling her skin. Obviously no answer. She pushed the door open all the way, letting the light from the main room spill into it. She tried again, louder: "Hello?"

There was no reply again, and she reached over for the switch with hands that were still trembling and flipped the light on, closing her eyes and opening them slowly, praying that she wouldn't see anything.

And she didn't, really.

There was a small bed in the corner, a plain, long twin. There was no head or footboard. It was more like a propped-up thin mattress on a metal platform. A single pillow, a single white blanket, both tucked in neatly and both dusty beyond belief. It looked uncomfortable and stiff. *Her* room had been provided with a large, lush bed, a huge headboard...piles of pillows and stacks of down comforters...And that was just in her prison bedroom.

A small closet door was open, revealing three suit jackets hanging there and a pair of shoes sitting beneath them. Several hangers were empty, and she wondered if that meant that he had come to take something or if there had never been anything else in the closet. His clothing had never really varied; he had always tended to stick to dark, conservative suits and shoes whenever she had seen him.

There was a small desk in another corner as well, and the chair had been overturned. She took a few steps closer, a little disappointed to see that there was nothing on it. Still, there were two drawers, and she opened the top one.

It took her a moment to recognize herself. Christine stared down at the picture. It was of her singing, and she realized that it had been taken during the small concert she had sung at here in the city months ago. She picked it up, staring at her own face. Even in the picture, she could see herself smiling, and her eyes seemed...brighter.

Christine rolled her eyes and tried not to scoff at herself, instead putting it down and picking up what was underneath it. To her shock, she recognized a few silly notes she had written to him during the summer, and she read over them, her eyes filling with tears again.

Erik, I'm not talking to you until you let me out of here. What you're doing is illegal.

Erik, I'll hate you forever if you don't let me out. And stop threatening Raoul. He hasn't done anything.

Erik, stop trying to bribe me into forgiving you. All I want is to be let out.

Erik, thanks for the strawberry ice cream, but I'm still not talking to you today.

Tears dripped down her cheeks, and suddenly she found herself laughing as well. It confused her. Why was she laughing at this? A deformed man had held her as a literal prisoner for weeks, not to mention all the restrictions he had put on her before that and how much he had threatened her and Raoul. Erik's behavior was not something to be laughed about, but for some reason she couldn't stop, and she actually sat down on the floor with the notes, crying and laughing in turns. The memories and feelings were overwhelming, and she simply sat for several minutes, looking over the notes and the picture. After slipping them into her bag, she opened the second drawer and saw that it was empty.

Christine sat there, staring at it, and then closed it and opened it once again, as if doing so would make something appear. But still nothing. The desk was almost completely empty.

She stood and looked over the desk, wondering if there was a secret cupboard or crevice like in movies she had seen, but the desk itself looked too thin to be hiding any compartments. Frowning, she then began to search the rest of the room, peering under the bed, pulling the sheets up (and having a coughing fit as a result of all the dust that flew around the room), looking under and around the empty bedside table, and even looking in the pockets of the jackets that were hanging. There was a pen in one of them, obviously forgotten, but that was it.

Trying not to panic, she went back to the main room and headed over to the piano. But the thought kept springing up, nagging at her. *Had she come all this way for nothing?*

No, it was not nothing. Even if she found nothing, to see this place and walk around it was like something out of a dream. It was a restatement of all that had happened here and almost a justification of everything that had happened afterwards. It *had* been horrible here. She *had* been trapped here by a crazy man. And she *had* come to care about him, despite all the things he had done. He had sat at this piano and had played endlessly for her. She had stood nearby and had sung endlessly for him.

The bench was dusty, and she used the sleeve of her coat to wipe it off a little before sitting down, looking around her. There were still a couple dozen books, and she reached over and picked one up, holding it in her lap and simply staring at it. He had brought her books during her incarceration.

Shall I read it to you? Would you enjoy that? I think you would like this book, Christine...Why won't you look at me? I know I am a monster. Do you think I don't know that? Do you think I'm not fully aware that I have locked you in here? Look at me! Please...What else can I do? You would only go back to that boy. Christine. Christine, look at me.

She looked at the title of the book in her hands. *Paradise Lost*. Absentmindedly, she thumbed through it. Some corners had been turned down, and she paused at them, seeing a few passages.

Never can true reconciliation grow where wounds of deadly hate have pierced so deep.

*Me miserable! Which way shall I fly
Infinite wrath and infinite despair?
Which way I fly is hell; myself am hell;
And in the lowest deep a lower deep,
Still threat'ning to devour me, opens wide,
To which the hell I suffer seems a heaven.*

She wanted to roll her eyes at the melodrama, but instead she found herself shaking, and she didn't have the courage to look at the other pages that had been marked. With a little breath and without telling herself why, she slid the book into her bag, closing her eyes as she did so.

The other books were similar and yet different. Most of them were books he had gotten for her; fairy tales, mysteries, biographies of people she found interesting, a couple music books...She hadn't read half of them, still enraged that she was in the situation in the first place.

Two books she didn't recognize at all, as they were not written in English. She didn't know the language at all, only that it was in no way any Western language. It looked like some kind of Arabic script. Opening the front cover, it took her a moment to realize that there was a somewhat-faded inscription. Her heart leapt in excitement before realizing she had no way of understanding what it said. She put the two into her now-heavy bag.

All of the music was gone, she suddenly realized. When she had been here before, there had been endless sheets of music scattered around. Most of it had been his, but now there was nothing.

So he *had* been here. He had cleared the apartment. Why? Undoubtedly he had thought she would give the location away instantly, but she had never said anything. Maybe there had been more information here, but he had taken it with him or gotten rid of it along with the music. For some reason, the thought made her heart skip a beat.

She searched the minuscule kitchenette next, but there was nothing there either except some unused dishes and cutlery. She had never seen him eat anything, which was...understandable to her now. Before she had felt bad for eating in front of him while he stoically watched and said nothing.

A few more minutes of searching and looking around, and then she was at the front door again, gazing around at the familiar, cold apartment, somehow numb to the chill of her still-damp clothing and hair. Her bag was heavy on her shoulder, but it was full of...*something*. Clues? Hope? Painful, unnecessary reminders of the past?

Whatever they were, she did her best to make sure that they stayed dry as she finally left the apartment and made her way back out onto the soaked streets, thinking of the hotel room waiting for her. She was going to order pizza and watch a movie. None of that would have been possible without *him*...She couldn't have afforded a trip to New York, a two-night stay in a downtown hotel, or any of the other things she was contemplating.

Therapy, relocation, or hypnosis. That was what the money was for. To help her forget. But she was using it to come back here and remember more. She suddenly thought of Raoul's message to her. *Don't be ashamed of asking for help.* Would a therapist have recommended this?

Christine climbed into a taxi as soon as it slowed down, confused and yet somehow more clear-minded than she had been in weeks. It didn't matter anymore what any therapist said to her. *She* had been the one to go through it all, and she was going to sort it out any way she could. With the books still heavy on her lap, Christine watched the rain-soaked streets of New York trickle by, feeling, for the first time in months, that she had a purpose.

***Chapter 10*: Chapter 10**

It was his own fault. He let his eyes crack open, knowing full well he would only see darkness. However, the *salah* was reverberating around the rancid room now, screaming at him to arise and perform his *fajr*, his first prayer. But that would not happen.

First, because he was not religious in the slightest.

And second, because he did not feel as if he could move.

His body was heavy, permanently stuck to the thin mattress on the ground, and he could barely swallow. He blinked blearily into the darkness, wishing that the *salah* could be skipped over for the next several days. *Perish the thought*. Religion was lost to him in countless ways.

She had been religious...

He cursed and closed his eyes again. His first thoughts of the day, revolving around *her*. Always *her*. She had gladly shared her faith with him, telling him about all the times she and her father had sung in her church services and how much she missed them.

However, this situation was his own doing. It was his decision to hide so close to the mosque, hoping to blend in with the swarms of people. Five times a day, that blasted prayer shook his bones, reminding him that he was no doubt damned in at least two religions because of his lack of faith and horrid sins...among other reasons.

What he wished for now, though, was not an opportunity for penance, but rather water and some pills to knock him out. The pounding in his head was only increasing the longer he was conscious, and he lay there a while, listening to the *salah* and vaguely thinking of variations on its theme, mostly featuring a shourangiz. Then he gave a muffled groan and brought his hand up to his face, hating himself more than he ever thought possible.

His face was covered in dried blood, and he could feel his barely-healed ribs protest the movement. This was his reward for his idiocy the previous night. Unable to sit still, tormented and nearly manic with depression and anger, he had become blindingly-drunk and had then proceeded to become involved in a number of street fights. He had relished each blow then, but now he wished he had been able to simply talk himself into ending it all before he had gone out and allowed himself to be seen, to be *beaten* on.

After hours, he had crawled back to this hovel, his mind numb from the alcohol and the numerous punches, and he had passed out. Now he was fully experiencing not only the effects of a hangover, but also another dose of physical pain. He had managed to keep the mask on the whole night, but it had cracked in several places and had bruised him more than taking it off would have. His injuries were not serious. He had inflicted a great deal worse on those he had come in contact with, yet it was still painful.

It was beyond stupid of him. Not only had he risked being actually *seen* and recognized, but he had allowed himself to become incapacitated for the next several days, if the feeling in his chest and head was anything to go by. He was not twenty years old anymore. Recuperation was no more a matter of hours, at most a few days. It took weeks—*months* now. He had only planned to be in this hovel for another day, yet there was no way he would be able to get up and move himself to another location now. What an idiot.

He breathed slowly for several minutes, knowing he would have to somehow get up and find food sometime today. He could feel his stomach twisting. It had been a while since he had last eaten something substantial, and the copious amounts of alcohol had done nothing to help. All thoughts of any type of food made him nauseous at the moment, but he needed something to sustain him.

The door was old, peeling, bare wood with numerous stains and scratches on it, and he watched it. If someone were to burst in, he would have no way of defending himself. Had someone recognized him from the previous night, it would have been too easy to follow him back to this hole and suffocate him. It would have been a small mercy, actually. However, the lack of armed assailants and assassins at the door meant that he had probably not been recognized, which was undoubtedly good, and at the same time disappointing. Either everyone else had been too drunk or high to realize who he actually was, or he had been in Western countries too long and most had forgotten about him on this side of the world.

For a few blissful, painful minutes, he fantasized of the door opening. She would fly in and apply soothing balms to his bruises and horrid face, whispering and singing platitudes to him, her hands soft and warm and healing. In a particularly insane moment, he imagined that she would press her lovely delicate lips to his wounds. The mere thought was delicious, tormenting. He was a greedy monster. He had already felt those lips on him. There was no way any sort of god would be merciful to grant it to him yet again.

And yet...for all of the misfortunes, all of the disasters and tragedies that had comprised his life, he still considered himself perhaps the most fortunate man on the planet. *Christine Daae* had kissed him. *Christine Daae* had touched him. *Christine Daae* had agreed to marry him. There was only one other man alive who could say the same, and that other man was half his age and was equal to Christine in terms of appearance and character. Both of them young and innocent...And yet she had agreed to marry *him*. Marry Erik.

Of course it had not been ideal circumstances...

Why are you doing this?! Erik, stop! Stop! You're killing him! Please!

Simply say it, Christine. Say that you will come with me, away from here. Say that you will marry me.

Erik, please...Please! Don't do this!

She had looked so beautiful then, her pale cheeks deeply flushed and tears tumbling down them. She had knelt at his feet, had literally begged him, and then she had actually tried to physically pull him away from her boy. Her hands were so delicate and smooth, grabbing at him, twisting into his jacket.

That night replayed in his mind, over and over and over. He was quite positive that it would be his last thought before he finally ended it all; the thought of her kiss.

To his chagrin, he felt the phone in his pocket buzz, and he groaned as he pulled it out and brought it up to his eyes, squinting to read the message.

Are you still alive? I haven't received the money yet, you know...You had better not cheat me out of this.

He rolled his eyes and swore, setting the phone aside and feeling himself relax just a bit as the *salah* finally began to fade away. And as blessed, peaceful silence once again settled into the room, he allowed himself to fade away as well.

Christine nervously straightened the book in front of her, checking what time it was yet again. Four more minutes, still...She tucked a stray curl behind her ear and bent over her book, hoping it looked like she was doing homework. The library was full of students, and she wasn't one anymore. It wasn't as if anyone would come look or try to kick her out, but still...Just the knowledge that she wasn't a student here anymore made her feel like more of an outsider than ever.

The books she had taken from Erik's apartment were before her. Two of them, she obviously could not read. *Paradise Lost* was sitting in front of her, looking somehow threatening. The two phrases she had read had been painful, and just the night before she had picked it up and had pulled the book open to the next marked page, which had a phrase that read:

Better to reign in Hell, than to serve in Heaven.

It had given her nightmares.

"Hey! Christine!"

Christine jumped and put *Paradise Lost* down on the two other books to hide them, looking up and seeing her roommate, Rebecca, waving and hurrying toward her. Looking around, Christine frantically tried to think of what to do, if she would be able to hide or somehow get Rebecca to go away, but there was nothing she could think of, and she groaned silently as Rebecca came to the table and sat by her, grinning.

"Hey! I didn't know you'd be here. I thought you were in class." Rebecca reached over to her backpack and pulled out a sandwich, and Christine felt her heart begin to thud, realizing that Rebecca was intent on staying here and eating her lunch with company.

"Ha. Yeah...just studying. Trying to focus for a test that's coming up..." Christine glanced at the time again. He was late. Maybe that was a good thing now.

Rebecca nodded enthusiastically. "I'm already dying, and the semester is only half over! I don't know how I'm going to survive finals. And next semester I have to design *four* pieces based on a specific decade. They're assigned to us randomly. Ugh, I better not get the nineties."

As her roommate continued to chatter absentmindedly about the latest projects she was working on, Christine looked over and felt her stomach jump when she saw someone headed over to the table. He was walking with purpose, dark eyes framed behind glasses, and he paused for a moment as he caught Christine's eye, hesitating until she gave an affirmative.

Feeling sick to her stomach and wishing her roommate would just *leave*, Christine finally nodded, and the man approached, smiling a little as he took a seat. Rebecca had gone quiet in an instant, looking between the two.

"Christine?" the man said. When she nodded, he smiled a little wider. "Good. I'm Arash. Sorry I'm late. I got out of class later than I thought I would." His voice was bright and slightly-accented, and Christine could feel herself blushing a little.

"Yeah, that's fine. I'm...um. This is my roommate." She gestured vaguely over to Rebecca, hoping Arash would just mostly ignore her like Christine was trying to do. "Thanks so much for agreeing to do this for me."

"It's not any trouble. You found these books a friend's house, you said?" Arash looked over interestedly at the books stacked, and Christine hurriedly pulled the two out from underneath *Paradise Lost* and handed them over.

"Yes, that's right. Like I said, I don't need a translation of the entire book or anything. I'd just like to know...what the books actually are and what they're about. Also..." She grabbed the thicker one, opening it to the front cover. "There's this inscription here that I'd like translated, if that's not too much trouble."

"Of course it's not too much trouble. It looks short." Arash took it from her and read over it, and Christine pulled out her notebook and a pen, hating that Rebecca was *still* there and was staring at the scene, her sandwich forgotten on the table.

A few minutes went by as Arash read over the inscription. He then looked over the two books and read what Christine could only assume to be the books' summaries. At last, he looked over, and Christine held her pen ready.

"Well, this first book is *Shahnameh*," Arash said, tapping on the one with the inscription. "It is very...classic, I suppose. It is the history of Iran told in poetry." He opened up the cover again and said, "This note is short. I will give you the best translation I can."

"That's fine," Christine said hurriedly, her heart pounding. "Just read it, please."

Arash cleared his throat and furrowed his brow a bit before saying slowly, obviously translating as he read, "*Erik sir, welcome to Tehran. The city is honored to have you here. It is clear we need you now, as our need for improved development is ongoing. Your talents and skills will be used well. I am at your disposal if you need anything. Please enjoy one of Iran's greatest works. Iran welcomes you, Dr. Nadir Farhadi Khan.*"

Christine wrote hurriedly, doing her best to copy verbatim what Arash had just read. There would be time later to read it over and think about it. Mostly she just wanted to get this meeting over with as quickly as possible, as Rebecca was obviously confused and fascinated and much too curious for Christine's comfort.

"And the other one?" Christine prompted. "The other book? What's it about?"

"It's a guide and history of Tehran," Arash said. "That is the biggest city in Iran and its capital."

Christine nodded, jotting down the information, and looked back up as Arash continued: "Do you know Dr. Khan, Christine?"

She shook her head. "No, of course not...I just found these books at a friend's house, like I said."

Arash looked at the inscription again, squinting a little. "Then your friend must have known him, maybe?"

She shrugged. "Maybe. I have no idea..."

"If it's the same Dr. Nadir Farhadi Khan, then he is a little famous in Iran." Arash pulled out his phone and typed something in, saying, "He worked for the government for a long time, but then there were problems, and he left. He lives in London, now."

He handed over his phone, and Christine took it, looking at the pictures that had been pulled up when the name was searched. The man was middle-aged and handsome, though he looked tired in the more recent photos.

"What kind of problems?" Christine asked, handing the phone back.

"I think it was a...scandal. Is that the right word? A scandal. It was maybe ten years ago, but I remember, because my father always supported Dr. Khan and was very unhappy about what happened."

Hoping she could find more clarifying details online later, Christine nodded, pushing the books into her bag and pulling out a plain envelope, saying, "Well, thank you again so much for doing this. You've really helped me. And...here." She handed it over, and Arash took it and looked into it briefly before smiling and standing.

"Thank you. I'm glad I can help. Let me know if you need translating again." And with a smile and a goodbye to both her and Rebecca, he left, disappearing behind a corner.

Only a few seconds passed before Rebecca exhaled and asked forcefully, "*What was that?*"

Christine bristled a little. It wasn't her business. Still, she always hoped that providing Rebecca with half-true answers would satisfy her enough to stop her from searching for her own answers online or from other people.

"Like I said, I found these books in my friend's house in New York." Christine zipped up her bag, eager to leave and go do more research on her own. "I couldn't read them, obviously, so I posted something online and asked for a translator on campus. Arash responded, and we agreed to meet here today."

Rebecca nodded, picking up her sandwich again. "Couldn't you just ask your friend?" she asked. "You could have saved yourself some money."

Christine shrugged, feeling her blush return. "He moved before I could ask him. He's...out of contact for a while for a trip he's taking, and I was curious. Not a big deal."

"Hmm." Rebecca looked unconvinced, her eyebrow raised and her mouth thin, but she didn't say anything else, and Christine didn't really feel like elaborating or inventing anything else. Instead she grabbed her bag and jacket and stood.

"Have a nice afternoon. See you later." And she left, her stomach flipping in excitement and her heart pounding.

Tehran. So Erik had been to Tehran, and he spoke Persian. He had never told her any of that, but the proof was in her bag. Just when he had been and how long he had been there was still unknown, but this discovery made her want to skip back to her apartment. It was one of the first things she had found out by herself, one more piece to the puzzle. She was still a little miffed that Rebecca had shown up and had tried to poke her nose into it all again. Christine would have asked Arash a few more questions had her roommate not been sitting there, but he had given Christine more than enough to go on for now. If necessary, she would contact him again later and ask. He had been nice enough, and the fact that he had given her a bit of information on this...*Dr. Khan* had been an unforeseen stroke of pure luck. Of course, like Arash said, it was possible that the person who had written in the book and the person Arash said worked in the government could be two different people, but Christine had a feeling that they were the same. It seemed to fit somehow that Erik had been...acquaintances with someone in the Iranian government. Hopefully he hadn't done anything bad or dangerous, but she couldn't really be sure at this point, and she wouldn't put it past him...

An internet search of Dr. Nadir Farhadi Khan brought up the pictures Arash had shown her as well as a couple small articles. She was sure there was more information available on Iranian websites or from Iranian papers and sources, but as that was out of the question for now, she skimmed over the English articles. Most were about internal Iranian conflicts with only brief mentions or a few sentences about Dr. Khan, and out of seven or eight articles, she was able to patch together some type of framework, and she wrote it down in her notebook.

Dr. Nadir Farhadi Khan. Got his medical degree at Cambridge. Worked for Iranian government for ten years. Worked on civil rights and human rights campaigns. Fired because of insubordination. (Over what?) Went to London.

After a few more minutes of searching, she stumbled across a small, one-page website that was apparently run by Dr. Khan himself. It was very minimal in design and content, and Christine looked over, her stomach still rolling in excitement and nervousness.

*Dr. Nadir Farhadi Khan, MD
Private General Practitioner
Those wishing to receive treatment from Dr. Khan may inquire at his office:
32 Warriner Gardens, London*

There was nothing else. Christine frowned, trying to look for links or other extensions that would provide more information, but there was nothing. No telephone number, no email address...As fast as the excitement had come, it was fading away. Was this another dead-end? Another wall? Another mystery she couldn't solve?

She gave an angry, frustrated huff and shut her laptop, folding her arms and glaring at it. For a few minutes, she tried to convince herself that it really wasn't that much of a disappointment. Maybe the Dr. Khan of London was a different Dr. Khan who had written in the book...But Christine still felt, deep down, that they were the same. And he had somehow known Erik.

Pulling the laptop back open, Christine spent the next half hour attempting to scour the internet for any contact information for Dr. Khan other than the address. Again, nothing. Apparently he enjoyed his privacy and secrets just as much as Erik had. *Did.*

To her annoyance, she felt some tears sting her eyes, and she sniffled pitifully for a minute before pushing the laptop away and standing to go over to her dresser. Opening the top drawer, she pulled out the silver bracelet and slipped it on. He had given it to her during her first night in the city, and she, already overwhelmed by everything, had accepted it with a nod and a whispered thank you, robotically putting it on her wrist. It had remained there over the next several months.

Her mind still full of questions, possibilities, hopes, and fears, she grabbed *Paradise Lost* off of her desk and opened to the next turned-down page, unsure of what she would find. The passage was short and again haunting.

Abashed the devil stood and felt how awful goodness is and saw Virtue in her shape how lovely; and pined his loss.

In the margins of the pages was a small sketch, and she looked, surprised, and realized that it was of a girl, the outlining minimal but the expression somehow peaceful, the lips turned up slightly and the eyes downcast in what appeared to be virtuous modesty. After a few moments of staring, she realized that it was *her*.

Erik had drawn her small, round mouth and thin nose with only a few lines of ink. The drawing faded into nothing at the neck, but she blushed just looking at it.

Her hands shook holding the book, and she sat down on the bed again, staring hard at the page. *Why. Why. Why.* The questions kept flooding, and she shut her eyes for a few moments, trying to breathe. What was she supposed to do now? She had *quit school* for this—this stupid research project! And it was going nowhere. Raoul would have been so disappointed in her...

Christine put the book aside and pressed her hands over her face, hearing the front door open and close, meaning Rebecca had just come back to the apartment. To her continued annoyance, there was a knock on her door.

"Christine? I'm back! Want to get some sushi with me for dinner?"

Hoping her voice sounded normal, Christine called, "No...no, thanks. I'm really swamped with homework. Sorry. Have fun."

A pause. "Okay. See you...later." A few minutes later, and Rebecca had left again, the apartment once again silent.

Brushing her hair out of her face, Christine grabbed the book again, taking a deep breath. As she scanned the pages, she saw another passage, and she stared at it.

Awake, arise or be forever fall'n.

Erik had not marked this one, but it seemed to enter into her and shake her. Her mind began to flood with protests and objections. She couldn't *possibly*...It wasn't really even *feasible*...

But why not?

What was holding her back? There was no school, no job...definitely no boyfriend. She had the money, and she definitely had the time. That was why she stopped going to school, wasn't it? For things like this? And it was another huge stroke of luck. It was England, where they spoke English. It wasn't Iran or...or...who knew where else. China. Russia. Anywhere else.

Feeling energized but petrified, she pulled the laptop toward her, her mind already reeling with possibilities and preparation. She would need a passport, a ticket...She would need to research the area, find somewhere to stay, find out where 32 Warriner Gardens actually was.

As she began looking at the passport requirements, she felt something like girlish thrill overtake her. Just like every other young woman, she had always dreamed of traveling.

You will see the great cities of the world. You shall rule over them with your voice. Simply pick anywhere on any map, and I will whisk you away at your command.

Well, I'd have to finish college first before I go anywhere, Erik!

Nonsense. The world will be your teacher. I will be your teacher.

Would you really do that? Would you really take me places?

Yes. For you, I would. For you.

He would never take her to any of the great cities of the world. She would go alone and chase after the ghost of a man who did not want to be found.

And who knew if any of it would be worth it.

Chapter 11: Chapter 11

Her hands felt clammy, and she wiped them against her pant leg as she shuffled along in the line, trying to block out the sounds of screaming babies and noisy people. The seven hour flight had not been very enjoyable, and she was feeling hot and sticky from being in such a small space for so long. Now she was standing in a long line, and she could see people in uniform checking passports. She clutched at hers nervously. It was stiff and unused, but it felt somehow freeing to have it. She had paid extra to have it processed and delivered as fast as possible, and the day it arrived was the day she bought her flight ticket, set to leave in two weeks.

The airport was blaring Christmas music, and Christine looked around, noting some decorations. Christmas was still a week or two away, but it surprised her how quickly it seemed to come. The months had flown by. The days had been long, but the weeks and months themselves had disappeared. And now she was here in London. She had alternated over the past few weeks, feeling determined and then afraid, thinking it was a good idea and then wondering what she was actually doing. But somehow she had convinced herself to buy the ticket, go to the airport, and fly for seven hours to a different country to try to find someone who may or may not have known the masked man who had been her teacher.

After a few more minutes, she was beckoned over to a small podium, behind which a bored-looking man sat, and he held out his hand. Christine put her passport in it, holding her breath. She had triple-checked all requirements for entering the country but was still nervous that perhaps she had overlooked something. Maybe someone would run out at her and force her back on a plane to New York City because she was missing a specific document or stamp somewhere.

"Reason for your visit, Miss?" the man said, his voice monotone.

"Just visiting. Tourist...things. Ha." Her blush deepened, and she watched anxiously as the man yawned and then stamped the passport, handing it back to her.

"Enjoy your stay."

Christine took it and hurried through the opened gates, sighing in relief. It wasn't as if she was doing anything illegal. Still...it was her first time traveling internationally, and she was by herself. How was she supposed to know what was going to be checked, asked, required when she actually got here?

After wandering around for several minutes, she finally found the place to grab her suitcase, and then she followed the signs that led her out of the doors and to a busy sidewalk and street. She waited in another line for a taxi, her stomach jumping up and down. The weather was windy and gray, and Christine thought longingly of the scarf buried at the bottom of her suitcase.

The taxi ride was warm and uneventful, and Christine stared out of the window with wide eyes, some of her nerves forgotten in the excitement of all she was seeing. It was all much more crowded and a lot grayer than she had expected, but it was still somewhere new and foreign.

The hotel she had picked was again medium-priced. She had looked at some pricier ones that were closer to the center of the city and Warriner Gardens, but she couldn't bring herself to spend that much money on a room, even though she could have afforded it. Maybe she was just more comfortable with mediocrity...Still, it seemed ridiculous to her to pay that much money on a bed and some blankets.

After taking a warm shower to wash away the stickiness of the airplane ride, she sat on the large bed in her pajamas, trying to decide if she should sightsee and then try to speak with Dr. Khan, or go to his office first thing and then sightsee after. She was slightly nervous that Dr. Khan knew Erik, and they were maybe...unfriendly or something, or maybe she would be in trouble for knowing Erik. It seemed kind of far-fetched, but then again, a year ago she never would have dreamed of a deformed genius musician trying to force her to marry him. There were things in this world that seemed unbelievable and yet they happened.

She browsed London tourist sites on her laptop for a while, making a mental note of what she wanted to see while here. Still, her mind kept wandering back to Dr. Khan, and after five more minutes she shut the laptop and set it off to the side, crawling under the warm sheets and sighing. She would try to see Dr. Khan first. That's why she had come in the first place.

Her mind raced with possibilities, and she dozed restlessly, nervous and excited. What would Dr. Khan say? Would he even know Erik? What if the Dr. Khan from the book and the Dr. Khan in London were two different people entirely? And...if it was actually the Dr. Khan she was looking for, what would he tell her about Erik? What if he knew where Erik was? Her heart thudded loudly at the thought. She wasn't sure if she...wanted to know that. Even though she constantly wondered, to have an actual location for him would be hard. So much had happened, and she wasn't sure if she was ready to know his present. She just wanted his past. The why.

Lying there, she ran a finger over the silver bracelet on her wrist, unsure of why she was still wearing it but not wanting to really think about that. She didn't really want to think about...any of it really, but she did continually. Just why was she here, in London, trying to get more information about a masked psychopath who had terrorized her? Who had almost killed her ex-boyfriend? Those kinds of questions hadn't stopped her from buying her ticket, though. They hadn't stopped her from flying over here, and they definitely wouldn't stop her from going to find Dr. Khan.

With a confusing mixture of excitement, doubt, worry, anxiety, and expectations in her, Christine at last dozed off to sleep.

Four Months Previously

He had been acting weird all morning.

Christine was trying to ignore it, but he kept staring at her, his unnatural eyes wide behind the mask. He had even forgotten to start playing her songs a couple times, and she had hesitantly reminded him.

"Yes. Of course," he would say quickly, looking down at the piano and then beginning. But then he would look back up at her.

So she was more than happy when the lesson was over for the day. She was looking forward to the afternoon. Raoul had promised to take her bike riding in the park, and she could hardly wait, her stomach fluttering excitedly at the thought. Of course she hadn't told Erik any of it. He thought she was going to go back to her apartment for the afternoon, maybe to take a nap and watch a movie. At least, that's what she had told him when he had asked earlier that morning.

She did feel bad lying to him, but what else was she supposed to do? He was being so controlling about it all, actually *forbidding* her from seeing him, and Christine was tired of it. Raoul was not a distraction. He was an...old friend, and she liked spending time with him. Erik was just paranoid, maybe thinking she would run off and marry Raoul at the earliest convenient time.

Christine blushed a little as she helped Erik gather and put away the music. She and Raoul *had* actually talked about marriage...joked about it...He had said it was

their "destiny" because of their time as childhood best friends.

"It's written in the stars," he had said, eating some of the strawberry ice cream he had bought for her. "We can't have run into each other like this after all these years for nothing."

"It's God's way of giving us a hint," Christine had agreed. And though they were both laughing...she knew they were both half-serious. Perhaps more than half.

"So are you going to have to elope with me, then?" Raoul joked. "Your crazy teacher would try to stop us, wouldn't he?"

"Definitely," Christine said, trying to stay humorous but also chilled at the thought. "But you're worth it."

He had laughed and had kissed her soundly.

Christine felt her blush deepen a bit as she finished handing Erik the rest of the music. Raoul had said that they were going to eat dinner at his apartment afterward, and she was nervous but looking forward to that as well. Dinner...maybe a movie. And movies often led to cuddling. And...

She cleared her throat, looking over at Erik, who was again staring at her. Feeling uncomfortable, she headed over to the front door, saying, "Thanks for the lesson, Erik. See you tomorrow!"

Standing by the front door, she paused, looking around.

"Where's my bag?" she said confusedly. She looked back to Erik, who was still staring.

"Bag?" he said blankly.

"Yeah, my purse," she said. "I left it right here..."

"I do not think you brought it with you."

"But I did," she said, walking around the room. "I know I did...I mean, I'm pretty sure I did."

"Perhaps you did not. I do not think you did."

She watched him, suspicious, but he simply stared at her, and she frowned. "It has my phone and wallet," she said. "I hope I didn't lose it. Maybe I did leave it in my apartment..." But she had brought it down with her, wanting to head over to the park and meet Raoul immediately after her lessons were over. Still...maybe she *had* forgotten it. Shaking her head, she went back to the front door.

"Well, I guess I'll go look in my apartment," she said. "If it's not there, I'll come back here and look again."

There was no reply from Erik, but she didn't wait for one. She went over to the door and grasped the handle.

It didn't budge.

Frowning deeper, she tugged on it, trying to twist it. It was solid, immovable. She looked around her shoulder.

"Erik? Could you unlock the door, please?"

He remained there, continuing to watch her.

"Hey!" She was starting to get annoyed. "Unlock the door."

"Why do you need your bag?"

She turned around to face him. "What?"

"Why do you need your bag?" he repeated.

"Because it has my stuff in there!" she said. "My wallet and phone."

"But you do not need those. I can provide everything you could wish for."

She rolled her eyes. "Erik...please? Just unlock the door for me."

"You do not need any of it!"

"Any of what? The stuff in my bag? I do need it!" Christine could feel her heart rate accelerating, though she wasn't sure why. Something felt...wrong.

"No. No! You need nothing in there. I have money, so you do not need your wallet. And you do not need your phone for any reason."

"Stop being ridiculous," she said. "I just...I'm tired, okay? I want to go to my apartment and sleep."

"You can sleep in your bedroom here." He, too, was starting to sound agitated. She was aware that she needed to be careful when his temper was stoked, but she was angry as well at this point.

"Unlock the door, Erik!" she said.

"Why?" He approached, his eyes flashing. "Why? So you can go run off with that *boy*? What are you doing today, then? Ah, yes...Perhaps riding bicycles in some park?"

Her heart seemed to drop to her stomach, and she stared at him, eyes wide.

"N-no..." she said stupidly.

"You are lying!" he hissed. "You were going to leave here and run off with him! You were going to leave me! Leave Erik!"

"Stop," she said, swallowing harshly. "No, I was...Erik, we were just going to hang out for a couple hours. It's not like I was going to *leave*. I mean, I would've been back for lessons tomorrow."

"Perhaps tomorrow, but what then? Every afternoon with that boy...He would have convinced you to leave with him!"

"Raoul goes to *school* here in the city," she said, trying to make him see things rationally. "He's not going to run off somewhere else with me." She reached around and tugged on the doorknob again. "And—and unlock the door now."

"No!" he snarled. "No, I will not! You are not leaving! You are not going to see him again!"

She stood there, staring, her heart back in her chest and pounding loudly against her ribcage. He wasn't *serious*...He wasn't going to *seriously* lock her in here...right? But looking at his eyes, his posture, sensing his anger, she had a horrible feeling that he was completely serious.

"Let me out," she whispered.

"You would only run to that boy of yours," he said, his voice deep and growling. "You will stay here!"

"Let me out," she repeated, tugging on the handle. "Let me out! Erik, let me out! Let me out!"

"No!" he roared. "I will not!"

Christine screamed—actually screamed—and pulled on the handle desperately, tears welling up in her eyes. What was happening? Was he actually *trapping* her here? She looked up at him once more, hoping her tears would soften him, but he only glared, his arms folded, his eyes full of anger and rage. She let go of the handle and ran to the bedroom, slamming the door behind her and falling on the bed. Burying her face into the pillows, she sobbed.

Sometime later, after she had cried herself out and was simply lying there, staring at the wall and hiccupping weakly, there was a soft knock on the door.

"Christine?"

She ignored it, hating him.

The door squeaked slightly as he opened it halfway, looking in. He did not enter the room, however, and merely stood in the doorway, watching her.

"You hate me. I know this. But...what else was I to do?"

She sat up quickly and glared through tear-rimmed eyes. "Let me out," she said again.

He stepped into the room then, reaching out a hand to her. It was shaking slightly.

"I love you," he whispered hoarsely, raggedly. "I love you. How can I allow you to see him when I know you love that boy? I love you. How could I not?"

There was a long moment of silence as they watched each other. Christine felt as if she were sinking somehow. Sinking in something.

His declaration was not a complete surprise. She had suspected it, deep down, but she had never allowed herself to address those thoughts, hoping she was just flattering herself and that Erik's interest in her was purely musical, that he only wanted her near for the potential of her voice. But...she had known. And to hear it spoken from him was somehow worse than his not saying anything and simply letting her half-believe it to be true.

After several more moments, he spoke again. "I understand that you are..." Another pause. "You are safe here. Perhaps...perhaps we will speak again in the morning, when we are both rested."

She swallowed. "I want my bag."

His half-exposed lips twisted into a humorless smile. "No. I think not." He stepped back to the door, saying, "Sleep well." Before she could answer, the door had been shut.

She managed to keep herself relatively calm over the next several hours by telling herself that this actually *couldn't* be happening. Erik would realize what he was doing and let her out. He would feel really bad...apologize again and again...Maybe take her out to the theater and buy her things and keep apologizing. Then she would be able to use this as leverage against him if needed. Anytime he started getting suspicious or nosy about Raoul, she would remind him that he had actually locked her up for a night and thus wasn't allowed to be mad about Raoul.

Sometime during the night, she heard the front door open and shut, and she waited for several minutes before sliding out of the bed and creeping to the front door, looking around, hardly breathing. But the front door was still securely locked. Then she ran back to her room and dissolved into hysterical, exhausted tears again.

She also felt awful because of Raoul. He would have waited at the park for an hour, maybe even longer...waiting, probably texting and calling her. Christine felt her blush return at the thought of Erik having her phone. Luckily it was passcode-protected, so he wouldn't be able to see their texting history, but he would be able to see Raoul's texts as they were first delivered. She wished she had a way of getting in contact with Raoul and telling him that it wasn't her fault, that her crazy voice teacher had actually turned out to be crazy and had locked her in his house after stealing her phone.

She didn't know how long she lay awake before finally falling asleep, and she was woken what felt like minutes after by another knock on the bedroom door. It opened again, and she watched as Erik looked in, appearing slightly nervous.

"Christine?" he said. "I have tea for you, should you wish it."

A pause. "No." She pulled the sheets up to her chin and lay back down.

She heard him give a soft sigh. "You are angry with me. That is understandable. But perhaps...perhaps some music? Will you sing for me?"

Wondering why he would even dare to make a suggestion like that, Christine sat up again, glaring. "No, Erik! I'm not going to do *anything* for you!"

He took a step back, as if struck physically by her words. His long fingers twitched nervously as they hung by his sides, and then he clasped them together and then unclasped them, looking unsure, the first time she had seen him so.

"If you're not here to let me out, then just go away," she said. "I don't want you in this room."

He watched her, his mouth twisted, his eyes wide and obviously pained, but she did not let that sway her. He did not deserve any *forgiveness* or soft feelings from her. And then he left, closing the door softly behind him.

She slept for another couple hours and woke feeling extremely dirty and sweaty. There was an adjoining bathroom, luckily, and she made good use of it. The bedroom was apparently the master bedroom of the...apartment, or whatever it was called if it was in the basement. She had never seen Erik's room, so she didn't know if he had an attached bathroom as well, but the size of her bedroom and the fact that there was a walk-in closet in the bathroom made it clear that he had given her the bigger room of the two.

"So what?" she grumbled, pulling back on her old, wrinkled shirt and pants. There were clothes in the closet, obviously for her, but she did not want to put them on.

She took a deep, steadying breath as she went to the bedroom door, and she paused for just a moment before opening it and stepping out into the front room.

"You are here."

She turned to see Erik standing there, watching her, obviously surprised.

"Where else would I be?" she said shortly. "And I'm only out here because I'm starving."

"Yes, of course. I have...there is..." He disappeared around the corner to the small kitchenette and returned with fruit, pastries, jams, cold cuts, and cheeses. She wanted to roll her eyes, but she was too hungry, so she simply sat at the table and ate quietly, intent on ignoring him and then going back to her room.

"Christine?" His voice was hesitant. "There are clean clothes ready for you in your closet. Did you not see? Would you like me to show you?"

"I saw them," she said. "But I don't want them. I want my own clothes. In my own apartment." She did feel slightly bad saying that, as it technically wasn't her apartment and belonged to Erik, but she was grateful that he allowed that technicality to go unmentioned between them.

"Ah. I see." There was another long spell of silence, and then he said, "Is there anything else you desire?"

"Um, yeah, actually." She looked up at him. "I want you to let me out of here."

"I cannot."

"Yes, you can!" she said, standing up from the table to face him fully. "Just unlock the door."

"No."

She let her gaze drop, breathing heavily, trying to think. After a few seconds, she looked back up at him, letting her eyes fill with fresh tears, trying a different tactic.

"Please, please, Erik," she whispered, her voice trembling. "Please let me go."

"How can I? What am I to do with you?" His voice sounded weak as well, and to her shock, he reached out and grasped her forearm, sinking to his knees. Before she could pull away, he had wrapped his other arm around her legs, pressing his masked face between her thighs, and she gasped, trying to pull away. He was not high enough to be inappropriate, but it was still...awkward.

"I love you," he murmured.

The real tears came then, and she choked on them. How was this possible? How could she have let this happen?

"Please, Erik," she said tearfully, attempting to tug her arm loose. "Stop!"

"Stop what?" he replied. "Stop loving you? That is impossible. I am your slave. Do with me as you will. Only do not leave me. I do not want to see your tears. I do not want to make you my prisoner. But what else can I do? I will always be second to that boy of yours unless I keep you here."

What was she supposed to do? Forgive him? Yell at him? How was she supposed to react to what he had just said to her?

With a sob, she at last wrenched herself away from him, stumbling, and then went back to her room, slamming the door behind her.

She lay there for hours, alternating between furious and depressed. He knew what he was doing was wrong...yet he was doing it anyway. How could she fight against that? He didn't care it was wrong, so appealing to that side of him wouldn't work. He knew it was hurting her, but he kept her locked in here. And no matter what she said, no matter how many times she promised, he would not believe her if she said she wouldn't see Raoul again. Because she knew they were lies, too. They both knew that as soon as she was set free, she would run to Raoul, tell him what happened, and beg him to protect her somehow.

He played the piano for a while, obviously attempting to coax her out. The music was beautiful, but she pressed a pillow over her ears, trying to block it out. She refused to let herself be swayed by the music.

A knock on the door came later. She wished there was a lock on it so she could lock *him* out.

"Christine?" His voice was soft. "It is late. Would you like something else to eat before you retire?"

She ignored him, not moving, not giving any indication that he was there.

"I can get you whatever you like," he offered. "You need not go hungry."

After a few more minutes, he finally got the hint, and he left, shutting the door and shutting out the light from the main room as well. Christine fell asleep more

easily that night, though she woke early, her stomach cramping with hunger. She got up and went to the kitchenette, beyond relieved when she realized that Erik was not there. The door was still locked, of course, but she was able to eat her fill in peace. Then she returned to the bedroom and fell back asleep.

To her extreme annoyance, Erik woke her up again.

"Christine? You must eat something. And here, look. I have brought the clothing you wanted."

She accepted the warm bowl of hot cereal silently, ate half of it, and then set it aside, burrowing back under the blankets.

"Christine?" He kept trying. "Would you like to sing today?"

She didn't answer, and after a minute he left.

He continued to come back throughout the course of the day, pleading with her to get up and do something, talk to him, *look* at him, but she steadfastly ignored him. Her body began to ache from lying down for so long, so when Erik was not bothering her, she was stretching on the ground, trying to get her blood flowing again.

He was becoming so annoying that she wrote him a short note, *telling* him that she was ignoring him so that he wouldn't bother her again. But then he did, so she wrote another note. Then another. And then one more when he brought her strawberry ice cream, obviously aware of her fondness for it.

He tried again the next evening, standing in the doorway, a book in his long hands.

"Shall I read it to you?" he said. "Would you enjoy that? I think you would like this book, Christine..."

She lay there, breathing softly, looking at the ceiling, thinking back on a movie she had liked as a child. She and her father had always watched it together, and she was singing one of the songs in her head, trying to block Erik's voice out.

"Why won't you look at me?" he then said hoarsely. "I know I am a monster. Do you think I don't know that? Do you think I'm not fully aware that I have locked you in here? Look at me! Please...What else can I do? You would only go back to that boy. Christine." She did not respond. "Christine, look at me."

No. She resolutely stared at the ceiling. He might lock her up in his house, but he was *not* going to be rewarded with her company or conversation for doing so.

His footsteps neared the bed, and she rolled away from him, now staring at the wall. *Go away. Go away. Go away.*

He simply stood there for several moments, and then he left. She fell into an uncomfortable sleep, her stomach growling and her eyes heavy and swollen. When she woke the next morning, she collapsed into more tears. *She would never get out of here.*

Chapter 12: Chapter 12

The office was plush, elegant, and smelled faintly of lemon. Christine sat in the comfortable chair, clutching her purse tightly to her, looking around. There were paintings on the wall, some landscapes, others of people. She could even see two Friedrich paintings, one called *The Tree of Crows* and the other one called *The Lonely Tree*. Something about his paintings had always drawn her in, and she was surprised and a little comforted to see two of them hanging in the office of a private doctor.

The receptionist at the desk was slim, dark-haired, and had large glasses that framed equally-dark eyes. She was polite but professional, and Christine had felt intimidated.

After finding the office thanks to the help of a friendly taxi driver, Christine had been happy to see a park across the street, and she found a bench that wasn't covered in frost or snow and had simply watched the office for a while. The thing that immediately stood out to her was the wealth of the visitors. Many people came in fancy, expensive-looking cars. A few even had drivers. Most were wrapped up in obvious luxury coats to ward off the December chill. Christine had sat shivering until her toes grew numb, and then she had stood, dusted herself off, and walked toward the office, hoping that she was just trembling with cold and not out of nerves.

It wasn't as easy as she had hoped to simply sign up to see Dr. Khan. There was a *lot* of paperwork, and the receptionist had eyed her suspiciously, even critically, for several minutes before Christine had said she would be willing and able to pay upfront if necessary. Of course, she wasn't really sure just how much this would cost...Hopefully less than a couple hundred thousand dollars. Still, the receptionist seemed mollified by that, and Christine had spent several long minutes filling in the information. She lied on a lot of it, hoping that it would go unnoticed. All she needed was to see Dr. Khan just for a moment, maybe even have three minutes to actually talk to him.

There was a bit of a scare when the receptionist said that it was normally a two-week wait to see Dr. Khan, and that he would be closed in two weeks because of the holidays.

"However," the receptionist had said, her accent crisp and clean. "Dr. Khan always makes exceptions for first-time patients. He will be with you shortly."

Relieved and yet still worried that the receptionist would check her information before letting her go back, Christine tried not to fidget in the chair. She pulled out her phone and blankly checked Raoul's social media accounts. It was mostly done out of habit, now. He had gone skiing in Colorado over the weekend. His friends had posted several pictures of them all together. Christine exited the screen, not sure what she felt about it. She had debated earlier whether or not to post that she was in London, but had quickly decided against it. She hadn't told anyone she was going. What if *he* were to see?

Christine huffed a little under her breath. As quick and smart as he was with technology, she was pretty sure he would be able to tell she had traveled to London without having to resort to looking at her social media accounts. Still, she had taken some pictures with her phone from the hotel window and when she had ridden in the taxi. If all went well with Dr. Khan, tomorrow she was going to take a bus tour around the city and visit some museums the next day.

Christine put a hand in her purse quickly, making sure everything was there. There were a few basic toiletries and a fresh shirt. If really necessary, if things went badly, she would take a taxi back to the airport and fly to the States as quickly as possible. She hoped it was all unnecessary precautions, but...when dealing with Erik, she didn't really know what to expect.

The office was quiet, no phones ringing and breaking the calm atmosphere. However, if Dr. Khan didn't list the number, then it really shouldn't have been a surprise that no one was calling. The only sound was the receptionist typing occasionally or the scratching of her pen.

There was a soft *ding*, and she looked up at Christine.

"Dr. Khan is ready for you, Miss Daae," the receptionist said pleasantly, and Christine nodded, grabbing her purse and heading to the only other door in the room.

"You are welcome to leave your purse out here," the receptionist said.

"No, thanks," Christine said. "I'd...I'd feel more comfortable if I kept it."

The receptionist raised a penciled eyebrow but said nothing else, and Christine walked over and pulled open the door with a deep breath. It opened up to a smaller hallway, and off to the left was an open door. She peered around it to see what looked like a somewhat-ordinary doctor's office, though without all the shiny posters of muscle anatomy and the skeletal system. There was another Friedrich painting in here, she was surprised to see. *Moonrise by the Sea*.

"Miss Daae?"

Christine jumped a little and looked to see that there was a man in the corner, smiling at her. To her further shock, amazement...*excitement*, it was him. Dr. Khan. Standing there. She recognized him from the pictures. He was taller than she had thought, nicely-dressed and clean shaven. And she had not been wrong in finding him handsome in the online pictures. She blushed.

"Please come in," he said, gesturing to a chair. His voice, though obviously lightly accented from his life in Iran, had taken on British pronunciation, and Christine found that attractive as well. She went over to the chair and sat down awkwardly, still clutching her purse.

He took a seat in the chair opposite, still smiling kindly. His eyes had slight wrinkles around them, betraying his age, and his hair was just beginning to become lightly touched with gray, but...it worked well.

"I am Dr. Khan," he said unnecessarily. "And I'm very honored that you are entrusting me with your health."

"Heh," she said uselessly.

Dr. Khan's smile widened a bit. "Now, Miss Daae," he said, reaching over to the sleek computer. "Is there anything we need to take care of immediately before beginning our initial interview? I see you came in with complaints of an earache. Would you like me to look now or after we speak for a bit longer?"

Christine blinked for a moment before suddenly remembering that she had just written *bad earache* under the category *Medical Complaints Upon Initial Visit* that had been on the paperwork.

"Um...after, I guess," she said, worried that he would look at her ears and know right away that nothing was wrong with them.

"Are you sure?" Dr. Khan pressed. "Earaches can be extremely painful."

Christine took a deep breath. It was best to do it just now...Just get it over with. She didn't want to waste his time if he had other actual sick people waiting to see him. And if he didn't know anything, she didn't want to awkwardly sit through a medical evaluation with a stranger.

"Actually, Dr. Khan..." She cleared her throat. "You're Dr. Nadir Farhadi Khan, right?"

He frowned a little for the first time. "Yes..."

"You worked in Iran for a while? For the government?"

There was a long pause. "I do not see how this is relevant, Miss Daae." His voice was a little colder now. "Are you in need of my medical services?"

"Wait—wait..." She opened her purse and pulled out the book and opened it up to the inscription, angling it so he could look. "I got this from...from Erik." It was all she could think of to say, no preface or explanation.

To her shock, she could see Dr. Khan pale. He looked at the inscription for a while before saying quietly, "Oh. I see." Then he reached over and typed something into the computer. The lights in the room flickered off, and Christine squeaked in surprise. There was still enough light from the window for her to see that he bent down to a drawer, opened it, and then pulled something out, placing it on the counter next to him.

It was a gun.

Christine felt her heart stop.

This was it. She could practically see herself being shot in the head and calmly disposed of. The receptionist would probably even help him. And it was all because she was stupid enough to go poking around Erik's past. *Why was she so stupid?* She should have realized that someone like Erik would have had a dangerous past, something not to be messed with, and yet she had spent over a thousand dollars to come to *London*, track down a doctor, and pull out an old book in front of him with no one else around. Maybe he wouldn't shoot her. Maybe he would just inject her with something that would make it seem like she died of natural causes...

Should she yell for help? No...there was only the receptionist here as far as she knew. And what if there were other people here but they were all in on it?

"Your purse, please," Dr. Khan said, his voice still calm, even though he was obviously shaken.

She handed it over without a word. He looked through it, pulling out *Paradise Lost* and frowning deeply at the sight. Then he rifled through the rest, maybe looking for weapons. She had nothing in there, unless he counted a toothbrush a weapon.

He found her phone and said, "Tell me the passcode, please."

She swallowed. "3745."

He typed it in and spent several minutes looking through it, one hand still resting plaintively on top of the gun. Christine could feel her heart beating in her throat, and she stared at the gun, waiting for Dr. Khan to pick it up and shoot without even glancing at her.

"Tell me your name," he then said.

"Christine Daae," she whispered.

He looked up at her, an eyebrow raised. "Your *real* name, please."

A pause. "That's...that's my real name. I promise. I have...my passport is in my purse. You can look at it."

"Stop," he said, sounding annoyed and agitated for the first time. "Just stop. Tell me now."

"Dr. Khan, I promise!" she said hurriedly. "I'm sorry—I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come, I know that now. But...Erik didn't tell me anything, and I just wanted to know, so I found your note in that book and then found you on the internet. Please. I swear I'm telling the truth."

"So Erik sent you? That's it?"

"No...I don't know where he is," she said. "I saw him in August in New York, and that was the last time."

He stared at her for what felt like a full minute, his brow slightly furrowed. The light from the window was casting winter shadows on him, and she waited, shaking, praying desperately that she would somehow make it out of this office alive. Even if she was shot...just something non-fatal. Like in the leg or shoulder.

"New York," Dr. Khan repeated. He looked at her phone again and then back up at her. "You're Christine Daae."

"Yes. I promise."

He frowned again and said, "You came to London to ask me about this?" He pointed over to the book.

"Yes," she said. "It's one of the only things I found after...Erik left."

"And you don't know where he went after he left New York?" Dr. Khan clarified.

"No," she said. Then, hesitating, she asked, "Do you know?"

He shook his head. Then he sighed, rubbed his eyes, and looked back to her, appearing exhausted.

"Miss Daae," he said. "It appears that we have a lot to discuss."

The cook kept piling more food on her plate, and Christine looked at it helplessly, feeling she might simply fall over and die if she ate one more bite.

"That's...um, thank you," she said, hoping the cook would get the hint and would stop putting things onto her plate. However, he merely nodded absentmindedly and scooped up another serving onto her plate before disappearing.

Dr. Khan laughed a little. "Rahim was thrilled to hear that you were coming for dinner. He insisted on making something traditionally English for you. Hence the cottage pie. He's always making Iranian food, so no doubt he's taken full advantage of his night of change."

"I'm going to explode if I eat anything else," Christine said, pushing away the plate of food with a grimace. "But it was wonderful, thank you," she amended hastily, looking to Dr. Khan.

"You don't need to look so worried, Christine," he said. "Again, I'm really very sorry for what happened in my office. But I simply had no idea..."

"Do you...um, expect Erik to send people to...get you?" she asked lamely.

"Not really," he said. "But with my past and the enemies I made in Iran, it really wouldn't surprise me if one of them simply showed up in my office. It's listed on the internet, you know." He smiled again. "And you can't be too careful. Assassins can be anyone, these days. Even young blonde American girls."

"I'll keep that in mind," she said, smiling a little. There were a few minutes of silence, and Christine looked around the small, elegant dining room, with its crown molding and expensive-looking decor. There was even a small chandelier above the table.

"Thanks again for letting me stay here," she blurted awkwardly. "I really can go back to the hotel if..."

"No," Dr. Khan said firmly. "It's best for you to stay here. Rahim is also very excited to have you as a guest. So you need to be here so all his efforts won't go to waste." Dr. Khan then smiled again, and it was warm and sincere.

It was only after a very *long* talk in Dr. Khan's office that he had persuaded her to show him to her hotel, where she gathered her stuff, paid for her one-night stay, and left with him to go to his upper-class apartment that was just ten minutes away from his office.

How was he supposed to know, Dr. Khan had said. Erik had never told him the name of the girl he had fallen in love with, only that he was in New York and that he was teaching the girl to sing like an angel. Dr. Khan then looked up the old news articles online, and Christine had blushing read through them with him, pointing out errors, discrepancies, or things she hadn't told the police. And eventually he had gotten the whole story.

"I had no idea it was that bad," Dr. Khan had said, looking worried as he scanned another short article. "I had assumed...I don't know. I thought he was being dramatic. He didn't really tell me much, you know. I had thought..."

"Yeah," Christine said, looking away from the article. "It was...really bad. And I was just so confused after he left. I went back to his apartment and found that book. And then I found you. It was...my only chance, really. The only real clue I had." She folded her arms. "And since you don't list anything like an email address or telephone number on your site, what else was I to do?"

"It ensures the medical care is more personal," he had murmured, still looking through news stories, obviously not really concentrating on what he was saying.

As she had cleaned up a little bit for dinner, Christine kept having horrid thoughts creep into her head. What if Dr. Khan was only having her come back to his apartment so he could kill her in private? What if he was going to trap her like Erik had? What if someone else was going to come kill her so Dr. Khan wouldn't have to?

Still, throughout the dinner, she kept looking at him, trying to see if there was anything suspicious or untrustworthy there. But he seemed so...honest. There was no other way to describe it. Maybe it was just her nature, but she did trust him. She had trusted him instantly after seeing him in the office, which was why his pulling out that gun had been such a huge shock to her. And besides, he had Friedrich hanging in his office. No horrible assassins would appreciate a German romantic painter, right?

Rahim came back, looked disappointed at her untouched plate, and then put a huge clear glass of what looked like layered pudding in front of her.

"It's trifle," Dr. Khan said, laughing a little at her expression. "Rahim really has gone all out for you."

"I can't eat this," she said, her eyes tired. "I feel bad to waste all this time and food, but I really can't."

"It should keep overnight," he said. "If you cannot eat it, then don't."

She pushed it away again gratefully. No matter how much she wanted to sit at that table and listen to everything Dr. Khan could tell her, her extremely full stomach and extremely adventurous day had taken their toll, and she couldn't stifle another yawn.

"Would you care for a nightcap?" Dr. Khan asked.

She shook her head. "I don't really drink," she said. She folded her hands together, looking around awkwardly, wondering if she needed to be excused from the table. Luckily, Dr. Khan noticed this and said,

"I've taken work off tomorrow. In the morning, I will take you around London. Simply name anything you would like to see. And then in the afternoon, after we've both had a little more time to think, we will talk. Does that sound fair?"

She considered this and then nodded. He smiled in return and stood to lead the way to her room. It was a good size with a nice bed, and Christine was a little relieved to see that her things had been left exactly where she had put them.

"There is a latch on the door," Dr. Khan said, showing it to her. "In case you're still a bit uncomfortable. Please sleep as long as you'd like. I will be ready whenever you are tomorrow."

"Thanks," she murmured, and he bid her a goodnight and left. Christine waited thirty seconds before going over and clicking the lock into place, feeling a little strange doing so. Her phone and wallet were still safely in her purse, and she looked through both of them, making sure nothing was deleted or taken.

The bed itself was soft, and she sank into it, trying to process everything that had happened over the last twelve hours. Before she could mentally go through everything again, however, she fell deeply asleep.

The next morning, after eating an unbelievable amount of what Rahim called bangers and mash, Christine walked around Piccadilly Square with Dr. Khan, both bundled up against the windy December day. She was appreciative that he didn't talk too much, only doing so to point something out or comment on an interesting piece of history. Mostly he just let her look.

It was all exciting and new, and she took a couple pictures, not sure who would ever look at them but wanting them nonetheless. It was all taken in somewhat mechanically. She kept thinking of the afternoon, of what Dr. Khan would say, of what *she* would say. He already knew the general story of what had happened between her and Erik, but no doubt he'd want specifics. And then...he would tell her just how he knew Erik and how well he actually knew him.

Christine bought an overpriced shirt with *LONDON* printed across it in large red and blue letters. When it was time for lunch, Dr. Khan took her to an expensive restaurant, and he looked a little insulted when she offered to pay, even when she tried to pay for half.

"You are my guest," he said, giving his card to the waiter. "It is an honor to do this."

As they drove back, Christine started to feel anxious and increasingly nervous, unsure of just what exactly she would be hearing soon. To try to distract herself, she looked over at Dr. Khan and asked, "Do you like living here in London?"

Dr. Khan smiled. "London is big, polluted, full of horrendous traffic and loud, inconsiderate people." He glanced over at her. "I enjoy living here very much."

She laughed.

"Did you grow up in New York, Miss Daae?" Dr. Khan then asked.

"Miss Daae sounds really formal," she said, blushing a little. "Just call me Christine. And no, I didn't, actually. I moved around a lot with my dad, wherever he could find work. We moved every couple years but stayed mostly on the east coast."

"What does your father do?"

"He was a musician." Christine felt her throat clog, and then she cleared it quickly. "He played wherever. Theaters, regional symphonies, production studios, in tours, even in some concerts...Just whatever, really."

"He *was* a musician?" Dr. Khan clarified.

"Yeah." Christine paused, feeling uncomfortable and yet somehow comfortable telling all of this to a virtual stranger. "He passed away right after I started college. Cancer." And to prevent more questions, she added, "My mom died when I was really little, too. Car accident."

There was a long pause, and Dr. Khan continued to drive slowly behind a long line of cars. The neighborhoods were becoming increasingly upper-class, meaning they were almost back to his apartment.

"You have been through too much," he said at length. "It is unfair."

"It's okay," Christine said, shrugging.

He looked over at her seriously. "No, Christine," he said. "I do not think it is."

And she could do nothing but agree.

In the guest bedroom, she cried quietly for less than a minute, simply a release of feelings and confusion and sorrow that had been brought up after talking about her parents. Her dead parents. Christine then wiped her tears away, grabbed the book from her bag, and went to the main room, where Dr. Khan was waiting with tea and a tray of small sandwiches and pastries. She couldn't help but giggle a little; it all looked so...English.

"Erik always mocked me for this as well," Dr. Khan said, pouring her a cup as she sat in the chair across from him. "However, it is something I grew accustomed to at Cambridge while I was studying and is something that I shamelessly enjoy."

Christine felt her heart leap in her chest at the first mention of Erik, and she took the teacup from Dr. Khan, her fingers trembling a little. She set the book on the small table and took a sip, trying not to grimace. It was bitter and earthy; she had always preferred fruity flavors for tea. Erik had always given her her favorite, a subtle blueberry flavor. *He* had hated it, but he always kept it in stock just for her.

"I see you at last have found my *Shahnameh*," Dr. Khan then said, nodding to the book. "He told me he had thrown it out at the first opportunity. I always knew he was much too sentimental for that, though." He smiled a little bit, as if remembering something.

"So you actually knew Erik, then," Christine said without question, feeling a little dumb for stating it but feeling a need to start somewhere. "How, exactly?"

Dr. Khan sighed, his expression collapsing into one of thought. "He was perhaps just a bit older than you when I first met him," he said. "He came to Iran by way of invitation."

"To perform?" Christine said, amazed at the thought but not surprised.

Dr. Khan gave her a puzzled look. "No..." he said. "Christine, has Erik really told you nothing?"

Slightly miffed but knowing he didn't mean anything by it, Christine shook her head.

"I wouldn't have come to London and lied to get into a doctor's office if I had known anything else," she said. "I was out of options."

He nodded and looked at her closely for several moments. Then he said quietly, "You know, Christine, all of your questions could be answered by Erik himself, I'm sure."

She felt herself pale a little, and her heart started to beat louder.

Dr. Khan must have noticed her reaction, because he said quickly, "No, I'm very sorry. That was terribly insensitive of me. I understand."

"I don't...I don't want to see him again," Christine said, her teacup shaking a little in her hands. "I can't. And who knows if he would tell the truth or not."

"I might not tell the truth," Dr. Khan offered.

She looked at him. "I think you will."

He smiled. Then he said, "Forgive me for suggesting speaking to him again. Of course you shouldn't. I thought..."

"It's okay," she said again. "I know."

For a few more minutes, both of them busied themselves with the tea and food laid out, apparently lost in their own thoughts. Christine ate a small sandwich and hoped no one would notice if she didn't drink the rest of her tea.

After she couldn't stall any longer, she finally said "So...Erik was invited to Iran?"

"Yes," Dr. Khan replied. "It was about fifteen years or so ago. Officially he came to help with developments in our technological departments."

"Officially?" Christine said.

"Yes, that was the stated reason. However, he really was...Well, he did a variety of things for us then, mostly with the Kurds." Seeing her confusion, he explained, "Kurds are an ethnic group in that region. Their history is very complicated, but there were rumors of secessions and uprisings in the western part of Iran, which has a high population of Kurds, and shortly after Erik arrived, the conflict escalated."

"Was that...because of him?" she said.

Dr. Khan shook his head. "He passed on a great deal of valuable information to us and helped stop a number of small raids and disturbances. It would have happened whether or not he was there. However, with him, we were much more prepared."

"So how did you know him? I read that you were helping with human rights." She didn't want to add that that didn't really exactly sound like Erik's area of expertise, but Dr. Khan understood her unspoken question and addressed it.

"We worked together on a number of projects," Dr. Khan said. "I knew the real reason of his arrival, and I was assigned to ensure that nothing became too...much."

"Too much what?"

"Too violent. Too graphic. Too inhumane." He looked a little uncomfortable. "Erik had a reputation that preceded him, I suppose."

Christine felt her heart skip a couple beats. "What kind of reputation?"

"A reputation of being those things," Dr. Khan said, obviously not happy to tell her this. "No one wanted a picture of a strangled Kurdish guerilla soldier printed on the front page of the paper. That was not our intent, yet we knew that Erik would need close supervision to ensure that that did not happen."

Her breath was coming a little shorter now. She knew Erik had a fierce temper. She had felt that raw energy and anger emanating from him on several occasions. She had even *seen* his violence that night with Raoul. Yet the possibility that he had done it all before...

"Did it?" she said, her voice cracking. "Did it happen? Did he...*kill* someone?"

Dr. Khan gave another smile, for the first time completely humorless.

"Christine," he said. "I am afraid that you really do not know Erik at all."

***Chapter 13*: Chapter 13**

Seven Months Previously

Christine rubbed her bare arms as she sat in the chilly and dim room, continuously glancing at the time on her phone. She was nervous that someone would walk in and tell her that she wasn't allowed to be in this room, but she had been instructed to be here at this time, and so she waited, wishing she had brought her roommate with her. It would be good to spend more time together, anyway, as Meg was leaving next week for Los Angeles, having gotten a position in a dance company there. The past week had been hectic, however, as Christine had been frantically trying to finish up projects and papers as well as study for finals, and Meg had been stressed out packing and shipping some of her things to her new apartment. Once things died down, they would spend their last few days together.

A door shut somewhere in the building, echoing slightly, and Christine jumped. She had only been in the Fine Arts building a few times and had had to look for nearly five minutes to find the right room. Her backpack was next to her, and she looked in it to ensure that the printed email was still there. Just in case.

She sighed, putting her chin in her hands. She was beyond sad that Meg was leaving and wouldn't be here to room with her for another few years, but the prospect of what was promised in the email was exhilarating. She hadn't told Meg about it, not wanting to say anything until the meeting today was done and some of the details were sorted out. However, she was sure that Meg would be thrilled for her, just like she was thrilled for Meg. Both of them finally able to do what they really loved...

Checking the phone again, she saw that it was two minutes to eight. She hadn't wondered about the time of the meeting. It was not uncommon for groups of students or other on-campus meetings to be held later in the evening. However, Christine had expected to see other girls in the room. She hadn't been able to flatter herself enough to think that she would be the only one. She had expected a handful of other girls, maybe a short, impromptu audition, and then only one or two be offered the chance to train in New York. The fact that no one else was here was at the same time encouraging and nerve-wracking.

She thought back to her blog post from a few days before.

I can't get my hopes up too high, but it feels like Dad is somehow helping me. I always thought he had just left me alone, like Mom, but I don't think so anymore. It's like he's helping me get onto the right path or something. Maybe it's corny, but I feel like Dad hasn't really left me at all.

Christine felt her phone buzz, and she pulled it out, reading a text message from Meg.

When are you coming home? Pizza tonite, k!

She smiled and was just about to reply when a voice echoed in the room.

"Miss Daaee."

Nearly dropping her phone, Christine jumped and whirled around, trying to see who it was.

"Hello?" she said.

A long pause. She was starting to become slightly freaked out until the voice said, "Thank you for being prompt. I will not take up too much of your time this evening."

"Heh." Christine stood, unsure of where to look. "Um, thanks. Where...where are you?"

There was another moment of silence. "There are several things we must discuss regarding your training for the upcoming months. However, I am hoping tonight you will not be...frightened."

"Wait. What?" Christine took a step back, her phone clutched tightly in her hand, as if it were a weapon.

"I have concealed myself from view momentarily for your comfort. I have no wish to startle you."

"What do you mean?" She was starting to become startled nonetheless.

There was another pause, the longest yet. Then the voice said, "It is customary for me to wear a mask."

"A mask?" she repeated stupidly.

"Yes." The voice was soft, rich, and calm, and even though Christine was frightened, she found it still beautiful, wondering if it could be soothing once she could actually see the man it belonged to. "It is for my own comfort," the voice said. "As I said, I did not appear immediately, having no wish to alarm you. It is simply a forewarning so you will know what to expect. There is nothing threatening about it."

"Why are you wearing it?"

"Many reasons," the man said. "Privacy being the foremost reason. It is simply something you must become accustomed to when I train you."

She wanted to ask if he had scars or burns, but she knew that that would be highly insensitive. Perhaps he was very famous and didn't want her to know who he actually was. She stood there for a few moments, trying to decide. Maybe if she just saw the mask, she would get a better idea of just what he meant.

"Okay," she said at last. "I promise I won't be scared."

A few seconds passed between them, and then the voice said, sounding almost unsure, "Very well. It is...Well. Do not be frightened, please."

"I won't," she said, her heart rate elevating slightly.

He appeared out of the far corner of the room, taller than she had expected, thinner than she had ever imagined. He was dressed in a dark suit with no tie, and his hair was dark as well. The mask was black, thin, and covered everything from his mouth up to his hairline. She stared.

"Are you afraid?" he asked after a few seconds.

She blinked, realizing she had been staring, and blushing looked away, feeling bad.

"It's a little unnerving," she said honestly. "Are you sure you can't take it off?"

"No, I am afraid that is not possible." He took a few steps closer, looking at her closely, his eyes intense. She didn't want to look into them. He then said, "It will not factor into our training in the slightest. It is of no consequence. Do you understand?"

She looked up then. "Um...sure. I guess."

He looked mollified by her agreement and then gestured to the chair she had just vacated. "Please. Sit. We have much to discuss."

She did so hesitantly, and he sat across from her. She noted again how skinny he was. The suit didn't hide it very well.

He spent the next fifteen or twenty minutes talking to her about her upcoming time in New York, what would be required of her as far as training and practice, and what he expected in result. There was nothing serious or suspicious-sounding. She would be taking daily lessons from him in the morning and would be expected to take care of herself as best as possible to ensure that her voice remained in excellent condition throughout. He was planning to arrange a few small concerts throughout the summer, which made her nervous but excited. Her housing and transportation would be taken care of.

"Of course, it is New York City, and I imagine a young woman like yourself will find much to enjoy. The afternoons are yours to do as you please. You may visit museums, exhibits, anything you wish, so long as you obtain my permission and do so under my terms."

She could hardly believe what she was hearing. It sounded too good to be true. A mask seemed a small price to pay for a free summer in New York, training her voice and performing.

"Are you sure there's not anything else?" she asked quietly. "It seems like...too much."

"Miss Daae, I am someone who recognizes immense talent. Your voice is in desperate need of training. Only with my help will it fully develop, and you will become the greatest performer in the world."

It sounded really dramatic, but she assumed he was only saying it to encourage her, so she smiled.

"Wow. All this just after seeing one of my videos? It seems unreal."

"It would be an unpardonable crime to allow you to let your voice fade away," he said. "I am honored to be allowed to mold such an incredible instrument."

She gave an awkward laugh, blushing. Then she said, feeling somewhat uncomfortable asking, "So, what's your name? The email just had an E at the end...I mean, what would you like me to call you?"

He looked at her closely. "Erik. You may call me Erik."

Present Day

Christine lay curled up in the soft bed, her head spinning and her heart still pounding.

Dr. Khan had told her horrid story after horrid story, ones she hadn't wanted to hear but had sat and listened to anyway. There was violence, blackmail, kidnapping...Done by other people to Erik, done by Erik to other people...There had been murder. *Murder.*

Erik had killed people.

"I am not going to excuse his actions," Dr. Khan had said. "But...like I said, most of them were corrupt officials...A few had murdered innocent civilians themselves. And some...A few soldiers who had been stationed in a town near what we thought was a Kurdish rebel group had raped several of the girls in the town. Erik...did some very unpleasant things to them. I will not tell you. But he was merciless. And we turned a blind eye and covered it up, even though it was my job to prevent him from doing things like that."

"Then why didn't you stop him?" she had asked tearfully.

"Christine, if you perhaps know a way of stopping Erik when he is determined to do something, I would love for you to enlighten me."

A few tears dripped down her cheeks, and she sniffled and brushed them away, feeling sick to her stomach.

"I'm only telling you this because you said you wished to know to understand," Dr. Khan said. "You need to know this to understand Erik."

"But I don't understand!" she had said angrily, her lip quivering as she tried to hold back more tears. "I don't understand! How could he do that?"

Dr. Khan had had no real answers for her, so she had gone to the guest room, locking the door behind her and falling onto the bed, tears coming and even more questions building up.

Why had he never told her?

She knew that question was stupid. Erik would have never told her about the horrible things he had done, wanting her to view him in the best light. And yet...This was another mask that came off, and it seemed more shocking than his face.

Christine again wiped at her wet face, pulling the blankets higher up to her chin, and stared at the curtained window. She could hear faint noises from below; people walking and talking, cars driving by...She wanted to jump into that normalcy, to have her life be simple again, to not have to be forced to deal with these areas of gray and confusion. Perhaps she should go back to the States, re-enroll in her university, and simply finish her degree, never again looking for answers. She *would* forget. She would do what Erik tried to pay her to do, what he obviously thought was best. And maybe it was.

Maybe this whole idea had been just...bad. Snooping around Erik's past, going back to the apartment she had been *trapped* in, letting the whole thing ruin her relationship with a man she had deeply loved. Was she so messed up to think that doing this would somehow make everything better?

Maybe this wasn't about closure, finding some semblance of understanding. Maybe it was all just because she could not let go.

Paradise Lost was resting on the nightstand next to her, and she reached over and opened it on the bed beside her, flipping through it. She never knew what she would find in the book, whether it would be depressing or thought-provoking, yet she was hoping for something to distract her from what she had just heard.

After flipping mindlessly for a while, she opened the page to find a photograph stuck there.

Quickly, so fast her head spun a little, she sat up, pulling the book onto her lap and looking at the photograph. It was stuck to the page but not glued, no doubt having been in there for quite a while, and Christine carefully, as slowly as she could, peeled it off, sighing a little in relief when it didn't tear.

It was a picture of a woman, the photograph black and white. The woman was extremely beautiful, and Christine felt herself blush a little. High cheekbones, large, wide eyes, long, dark hair...The woman looked young, too, perhaps only a couple years older than Christine herself. The photo cut off at bare shoulders, the only ornamentation a large necklace and some dangling earrings. It almost looked like an ad for jewelry. Christine wondered if Erik had just found the picture and had thought the woman beautiful and had kept it. It seemed a little bit of a stretch, but Christine didn't know why else he would have it.

She noticed the words behind the picture had become smudged slightly, no doubt from Christine removing the picture after what probably was several years stuck in the book. The few lines made her stomach turn.

*Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay
To mould me man? Did I solicit thee
From darkness to promote me?*

Christine looked back to the dark-haired woman, hardly daring to wonder. Was she...?

Her immediate thought was to take the picture to Dr. Khan, yet she hesitated. Dr. Khan had told her that he did not know any more about Erik's beginnings than she. And...for some reason, she felt a bit possessive of it all. This was *her* research. Dr. Khan was not her partner or fellow traveler. Still...what if he knew who the woman actually was? What if the woman was just a random woman and Christine was thinking too much into it?

Unsure and nervous, Christine took a picture of the woman with her phone, just in case something happened to the photograph itself. She looked at it, trying to see similarities between her face and...

That was something of a pointless exercise. Christine looked back at *Paradise Lost*. There had to be a reason Erik had put this in that particular place in the book. He had obviously read and re-read the book. It was more than just a story and words to him. *He* was in the book. So who was she in the book? Who was the woman?

Her dreams were full things just out of her sight, and no matter how much she ran or pushed through, she wasn't able to really see anything. She woke early the next morning, confused and tired. She pulled on a sweater and brushed out her tangled hair, looking into the mirror and seeing her pale face and dark-ringed eyes staring back at her. A glance out of the window told her that it was snowing, thick and blustery.

Dr. Khan was in the dining room, waiting with tea and coffee and a heavy-looking plate of breakfast waiting for her. There were eggs, toast, fried tomatoes, and beans. Christine felt her stomach roll, hungry and yet somehow a little nauseous.

He smiled when he saw her and said, obviously seeing her reaction to the food, "It's important to have a large breakfast, you know. Besides, you were looking a bit peaky last night."

"Oh. Thanks." She sat down and picked up her fork. To her relief, once she took a few bites, the nausea passed, and she enjoyed the warm food.

"I'm afraid I have to go to the office today," Dr. Khan then said.

Christine blushed a little. "Yeah. Sorry. I'll...I'll get my stuff and go back to a hotel."

He frowned. "No, that isn't what I meant. You are more than welcome to stay for however long you wish. I was simply informing you. I've told Rahim that he should take you and show you whatever you'd like."

That prospect was a little uncomfortable, but Christine said nothing. Dr. Khan had already gone out of his way to make her stay here nice and as comfortable as possible. So she nodded and murmured a thanks, not sure what she would do that day at all.

As she sat, she was surprised when Dr. Khan said quietly, "Christine, I feel that I should tell you that...Erik was a very good friend. He did things that I can't excuse, but he also did a lot of good."

Christine looked at him. "Like what?"

"Well..." Dr. Khan looked a little uncomfortable again. "He never hurt anyone who wasn't guilty in his eyes."

She rolled her eyes in response. "Wow, he definitely deserves the Nobel Peace Prize, then..."

"Erik was always a very good judge of character," Dr. Khan said. "He was very competent in determining someone's intentions. He can read people very well."

"But he can't just decide who's guilty or not," Christine said, more conflicted than before. "He's not some...some vigilante superhero."

"He never tried to be heroic or convince himself that it was his job to be the one to right those wrongs. He simply did what he had to do. I'm not saying his judgment of right and wrong is flawless, but...he was not some mindless killer. And he saved countless lives as well. Mine included."

Christine looked up quickly. Dr. Khan appeared melancholic yet somehow assured of what he was saying, and she looked back to her breakfast, poking at the tomatoes for a while.

Dr. Khan continued: "He also...Well. He didn't leave Iran unscathed, either." When she gave him a confused look, he said slowly, apparently trying to phrase everything perfectly, "There was retribution for what he did, for the fact that he was working for us and was a foreigner. His mask obviously didn't help. He endured his own fair share of violence. I remember one night..." His face clouded, and he shook his head.

"One night what?" Christine pressed.

"I thought he was going to die," Dr. Khan said after another moment. "He had been badly injured by some Kurds but somehow made it to where I was stationed, practically crawling, unable to stand...I've never seen so much blood. And they were not gunshot wounds, either."

She felt her stomach turn and didn't want to know anymore. Then she said, "When did you stop talking to him?"

"We've spoken sporadically throughout the years," Dr. Khan said. "He never told me anything specific, but early this year he said he was going to the States. It surprised me at first. He's never really been that fond of America. But now I see why he was so adamant on going." Dr. Khan gave her another smile. Then he said, "He mentioned you a few times, but there was nothing specific. He hasn't spoken to me since then."

He checked the clock and drank the rest of his coffee before sighing and standing, signifying the end of the conversation.

"Rahim has my mobile number in case you need to contact me today for anything," he said. "Maybe you should go to the London Eye today, if you're unsure what to do. There are plenty of museums and things to see nearby. Just make sure you dress warm."

Christine nodded blankly and murmured a 'goodbye' in response as Dr. Khan left, feeling a little forlorn and awkward being alone in his house.

Luckily, Rahim was outgoing and surprisingly funny, and he persuaded her to do what Dr. Khan suggested and go out to sightsee some more. It felt relieving to have a couple hours of fun in the snow, away from violent stories and horrible revelations. Rahim knew plenty of places to go, took her to several little fish and chips shops throughout the day and afterward made her decide which one she liked best, and also provided a good amount of commentary and stories. When she had been out with Dr. Khan, she had wanted time to think and gather herself. Now, however, she wanted distraction, and she was happy to let it sweep her up.

She returned to Dr. Khan's apartment in the late afternoon, her nose numb, her hair windswept, and her eyes watering from the cold. Rahim was nice enough to offer her tea and sandwiches, though she blushingly asked for a different flavor of tea and was very thankful when he acquiesced.

Dr. Khan found her curled up on a large chair with a blanket and another cup of fresh tea, looking over *Paradise Lost* again and thinking about the picture of the woman that had been in its pages.

During dinner, Dr. Khan looked at her seriously.

"Where are you going after this, Christine?"

She looked up at him. "After dinner?"

"No. After you leave London."

Christine blushed a little. "Um...back home, I guess. Back to my apartment in the States."

"When?" He folded his olive-skinned hands together and continued to watch her carefully.

"My flight is in two days," Christine said. "I can...go earlier though, if you need me to."

"No." Dr. Khan smiled a little. "I was simply thinking that you should reconsider and stay here over the holidays."

Christine frowned a little. "No, that's...I couldn't."

"Is there someone you normally celebrate with? I may not be Christian, but I'm not unaware of how important this time of year is for families and friends."

Was he trying to hurt her? Christine blinked a few times. Was he trying to remind her of how alone she was? She had been somewhat able to push the idea of Christmas out of her mind during her time here, even though everywhere she looked storefronts and windows were decorated with lights and holly. She had tried to be focused instead, pushing things like the fact that she had no one this year out of her mind. After her father died, she had celebrated with her roommate Meg and Meg's mother, but both of them had moved across the country, and Christine wouldn't dream of inviting herself over.

"I usually stay with my friend," Christine said shakily, swallowing harshly. "I'm...it's fine."

"Christine, I would be honored if you stayed here," Dr. Khan said seriously, seeing through her lie. "I don't think it would be good for you to be alone."

He knew she had no one. That fact was obvious by now. Here she was, alone in London, trying to chase after the past of a man she barely knew by grasping onto thin wisps of clues, anything and everything that might point her in some sort of direction. But she couldn't stay here for Christmas either, with another man she barely knew.

"I can't," she said at last. "Thank you for the offer, though."

Dr. Khan frowned deeply but didn't try to argue. Instead he said simply, "You are more than welcome to change your mind and stay."

She nodded and returned to her dinner, the mood much more subdued now, and the flood of questions and confusion came. The brief, exciting distractions of the city were escaping, and she felt herself wanting to demand every answer from Dr. Khan, even though she knew he had told her what he could and would have no other answers for her.

Erik, why won't you ever tell me anything about yourself?

Ignorance is bliss, my dear.

Maybe just a last name, then?

No. Do not ask again.

He had always been curt and short-tempered whenever she had tried to pry, causing her to give up after just a few weeks. But now he wasn't here, and now he didn't know.

After getting ready for bed, Christine sat on the bed, her notebook in her lap, and she flipped to one of the first pages. Most of it was still blank.

Name: Erik ?

Birthplace: ?

Birthday: ?

Family: ?

She paused over the last category. *Significant Life Events*. Then, taking a breath, she began to write.

Chapter 14: Chapter 14

She couldn't help but wince as her roommate sang along loudly to whatever was playing on her phone. Rebecca's headphones were on, so Christine couldn't be sure what exactly was being played, but it was definitely...interesting, whatever it was.

She picked up another box and carried it to the front room, trying to make sure she didn't stumble over the various scraps of cloth, sewing supplies, pictures, and other things that littered the front room. It was a little annoying trying to be so careful when Rebecca was oblivious to the fact that she had created something of a hazard with all of her stuff strewn everywhere, but the last thing Christine wanted to do was argue on her last night there.

Tomorrow morning, a moving truck would arrive and help her shuttle all of her things to a small studio apartment across town. It was much farther away from the university, meaning Christine wouldn't be surrounded by college students. She had again felt like an outcast once the semester had started up again. The new apartment would be private, quiet, and hopefully provide a small space she could feel comfortable in.

Rebecca hadn't been too upset by the news. She had actually been a little excited and had said, "Sell your lease to my friend Hailey! She'd love to take it. She's looking to get away from her place because her roommate is always smoking pot." So Christine had done so. The new girl would be moving in as soon as Christine was moved out.

On her second to last trip, Christine tripped over a piece of thick, tie-dyed fabric. She stumbled and dropped the box, groaning as her various belongings were thrown throughout the room. At least nothing breakable had been in there.

Rebecca pulled her earphones out and looked around. "Oh, no! Did you trip over something? Sorry."

Trying not to be angry, Christine gathered the things up, tossing them quickly back in, not caring anymore if they were packed neatly. To cover up the awkward silence yet unable to not express some of her frustration, she asked lightly, "What are you doing out here?"

"Oh!" Rebecca smiled widely. "I'm starting my projects. It'll take me all semester, so I'm starting early. And I got the eighties." She shrugged. "It wouldn't have been my first choice, but at least they had some good music and a lot of stuff going on fashion-wise. I'm trying to get some inspiration." She grabbed a large board that was leaning up against the wall and showed it to Christine. "See? I found tons of stuff in some magazines in my mom's storage."

The board was covered with pictures of clothing, accessories, celebrities, singers, and other things. Christine glanced at it, forcing a smile as she walked back to her bedroom.

"That's nice."

Only the necessities remained in her room. She would wake early and finish packing in time for the moving truck.

The bed was hard and cold, and she sat down, looking at the last box she had packed. It was full of her...research. Was that the right word? It seemed so formal. But the books were there, the things she had always kept hidden as well as the scarf and pictures. She resisted the urge to pull out *Paradise Lost* and look at the unknown woman. She still didn't know who she was.

Christine had tried to do an image search, uploading the image from her phone onto a search engine, but nothing had come up. She had spent most of the past weeks frustrated, confused, and upset that she hadn't come any closer in finding the woman. Her dreams seemed to be full of her now, the face always in and out of her consciousness, and Christine could have sworn that she had seen her somewhere before, but she had no idea where. The longer she looked, the more familiar the woman seemed to become, but Christine told herself that it was only because she was spending an unhealthy amount of time wondering about the unknown woman.

That night was no different, and Christine woke earlier than usual as a result, well before the moving truck would arrive, so she took her time and ate breakfast in the silent apartment. Rebecca was still sleeping, and Christine doubted whether she would be up by the time that she was gone. It wasn't a very upsetting thought.

With a little sigh, Christine finished packing the rest of her room and took the last few things to the front door, trying not to grumble about the things Rebecca had left strewn all over the front room. It was especially annoying because Rebecca was usually at least somewhat considerate and didn't make a mess in their shared living space. Maybe the fact that Christine was moving out was a signal to her that it was fine to take over the rest of the apartment.

She looked around and glanced again at the board Rebecca had pinned things on for inspiration. Christine had never been much into pop culture, especially not pop culture from over thirty years ago, and so it wasn't a surprise that she didn't recognize anyone.

After a moment, she looked away. Then she paused and looked back. Her stomach dropped. Setting her things down, she marched over and grabbed the board, holding it up, staring, unable to breathe, unbelieving.

Nearly frantic, Christine went to Rebecca's room and walked in, uncaring of the fact that it was barely seven in the morning and that Rebecca usually slept for another two hours at least. She went over to the bed in the corner and shook her roommate's shoulder.

"Rebecca, wake up. Please."

Rebecca gave an annoyed groan and opened her eyes a little blearily.

"What? Christine, get out of my room..."

"Who is this woman?" Christine pulled the board up higher and pointed to a picture.

"Hmm?" Rebecca squinted and then furrowed her brow deeply when she realized what Christine was holding. "Hey! Christine, be careful! That's mine! Put it down."

Christine looked back at the picture, her heart thumping. It wasn't possible...was it? Maybe she was just trying to make it true. Yet...

She put the board back down and ran to the front room, grabbing a labeled box and pulling out *Paradise Lost*. The picture was still there, and she took it back to the Rebecca, shoving it in her line of sight.

"Is this the same woman?" She pointed to the picture on the board of a woman in a white top, head tilted as she stared into the camera.

Rebecca frowned in confusion but looked between the two. "It looks like it," she said slowly, obviously still half-asleep. "Are you okay, Christine?"

"I'm fine," she replied quickly. "Are you sure? I think they look the same, but I have to know if they're the same woman."

"I think they are," Rebecca said, blinking. "Why? What are you doing in my room? Are you sure you're okay? You've seemed off ever since you came back from Christmas break."

"I'm fine!" Christine insisted. "Who is she? What's her name?"

"I don't know," Rebecca said, obviously getting annoyed. "Some model from the eighties, probably. That picture is definitely some kind of jewelry ad." She pointed to the one in Christine's hand.

"What magazine did your picture come from? I have to find out who she is!"

Rebecca looked extremely irritated now. "I don't know. But get out of my room, please. I'm tired."

Undeterred, Christine asked, "Do you know how I could find out who she is?"

Rebecca looked at her closely, obviously trying to decide whether to help her or order her out of the room again. Maybe deciding that Christine wouldn't go away unless she got an answer, Rebecca groaned again. "Um. I guess you could talk to one of my professors...She might know. But, I mean, you can't expect her to know every model that's been in every magazine. So don't get your hopes up."

"What's her name? Where's her office?"

"It's Dr. Soelberg," Rebecca said shortly. "You can look up her office on the university website. Now is that everything? Get out!"

Not in the least bit fazed by Rebecca's tone, Christine left, almost annoyed when she heard a knock on the door, signaling the moving van's arrival and that she had no more time to do any research that morning. Before answering the door, Christine scribbled down the name of Rebecca's professor, circling it, nearly giddy with excitement.

The pure luck of it all overwhelmed her again. She had been so lucky about everything. It was a little worrying but also somewhat relieving. Simply...confusing. Before, when she had been offered the chance to train in New York, she couldn't believe her luck and had believed that it was her father who was helping her. However, Christine wasn't sure about that anymore, and she definitely wasn't sure if her father was guiding her in this. He would have probably strongly disapproved.

Later that afternoon, after simply dropping her things off in the new apartment without even beginning to unpack, Christine took a bus back to campus, praying that Rebecca's professor was still in her office. The picture was securely in her bag, and Christine couldn't help but glance at it every few minutes, worried that it would somehow slip out and disappear.

At least she knew where to start looking if Dr. Soelberg wasn't able to help. If Rebecca was right, and the woman was a model from the eighties, Christine would dig through every archive possible, click through every digitalized picture, look anywhere to find out who the woman was. She didn't want to assume anything about the picture, but she had already assumed so much, and she wasn't sure if she was more afraid of finding out what she already suspected or finding out that the woman held no connection to Erik and his life. And yet...it was still very hard for Christine to imagine Erik sticking a random picture in a book that so obviously meant a great deal to him. So far, everything in the book had had meaning and importance.

Christine spent several minutes wandering around the building, trying to find the right room. When she did find it, she saw that the door was open and the light was on, and Christine took a deep breath, pulled out the picture, and approached, knocking softly.

"Excuse me? Dr. Soelberg?"

A slim, elegant-looking woman looked at Christine curiously, somewhat cautiously.

"Hi," Christine began, blushing deeply. "Um...You don't know me. My name is Christine Daae. I'm...roommates with Rebecca, one of your students. And I found...this picture. This picture here. Um, I found it, and Rebecca said you might know who she is. I'm trying to figure it out. It's really important." She continued to blush as Dr. Soelberg looked at her in confusion.

Still, with an air of simply humoring her, Dr. Soelberg gestured for Christine to enter into her office and held out her hand for the picture. Quickly, Christine passed it over, her heart pounding.

"Thank you," she said quickly, sitting down in the chair across the desk.

"I'm happy to help all students," Dr. Soelberg said simply, her voice light and clear. She grabbed a pair of small glasses and put them on before looking carefully at the picture.

"Rebecca said the model is from the eighties," Christine offered.

"The large pendant necklace and quality of the picture would appear to confirm that," Dr. Soelberg said, frowning a little as she examined the picture. "I am not an expert on every model who has ever graced the pages of a magazine, Miss...?" She looked up, having obviously forgotten Christine's name.

"Christine Daae," she provided hurriedly, trying not to feel discouraged. "Is there any way you could tell me how I could find out who she is?"

"Tell me again why you're so anxious to find out who she is," Dr. Soelberg said. "If you're looking for similar jewelry, you're going the wrong direction in finding it."

"No, I don't care about the jewelry," Christine said. "I...I think she might be related to a friend of mine. It's really, really important that I find out."

"You think she might be related, but you have no idea who she is?" Dr. Soelberg said, raising a perfectly-shaped eyebrow in skepticism.

Christine paused. "I know it might seem a little confusing, but yes. And it's...beyond important to me." She took a deep breath, trying to be mature. "I was just hoping you could help me, Dr. Soelberg. If you can't, I'm sorry for barging in on you like this."

Dr. Soelberg watched her for another minute and then said, "I don't know who she is, but I'm sure I can find someone who does. Let me send the picture around to some of my colleagues. I'll see what I can do for you, Miss Daae."

Restraining herself from jumping to her feet in excitement, Christine instead clasped her hands together and bounced her knees. "Thank you, thank you! That would be amazing." Then she paused again. "But...the picture? You're going to keep it?"

"I'll just scan it into my computer and send around a digital file via email," Dr. Soelberg said, smiling wryly. "Much quicker and less complicated."

"Oh. Yeah." *Duh.*

Five minutes later, after they had exchanged email addresses, Christine thanked her profusely twenty more times and then headed out of the office and onto the snowy campus, feeling an insane urge to just run. It was exhilarating, unbelievable.

That evening, Christine started unpacking and organizing, stopping only to eat a dinner of cookies and blueberry tea. It had begun to snow again, and she watched it fall for a while, remembering.

She had been sad to leave London but had been ready for the next question. Dr. Khan had been nice enough to drive her to the airport, though he had asked her several more times whether or not she had changed her mind and wanted to stay over the holidays. Christine had been firm. They had even exchanged a few brief email conversations.

I hope you enjoy your holidays, wherever they may be, and I really do wish you the best of luck with your search for answers and for peace.

Two days before Christmas, Meg had texted her, apologizing for not getting in contact with her earlier and asking if there was any way she could afford to come out for the holidays. Christine could have afforded it...yet for some reason she hadn't done so. Her Christmas had been spent alone in the apartment, watching holiday movies and eating takeout. She had cried once, but her tears had dried quickly. She had chosen to be alone.

Raoul's aunt had posted several pictures of their holiday gatherings on a few social media accounts, and Christine had looked at them with a funny feeling in her throat. Had things all gone according to plan, she would have been there with them, a ring on her left finger, happily living as the new, young Mrs. Christine de Chagny. She remembered teasing Raoul about it.

"How am I supposed to be your wife when I don't know any French?" she had asked one summer afternoon as they were sitting in a cafe. "I can't even pronounce your last name right!"

"As long as you can say baguette, you'll be perfect," Raoul had replied, grinning. He reached over and took her hand. "But really, Christine. I'd love to take you to Paris one day. I haven't been there in a couple years, either...We could go see the house I grew up in."

"And the Eiffel Tower," she said, smiling as well.

"That, too," he agreed, laughing. "Will you come with me, then? After we get married?"

She had agreed instantly, leaning over the table to softly kiss him.

Now, looking back, it had all seemed so...unreal. Unbelievable. Six months ago, she had honestly believed she would be married to Raoul. Instead she was sitting there in her small, single apartment, sipping tea on a January evening and looking through her pictures from London. She had even blushing asked if she could have a picture of her and Dr. Khan together, and Dr. Khan had been nice enough to agree.

It took a few days for Dr. Soelberg to reply with the information. During that time, Christine did her own meager research, simply searching for models on the internet.

Dr. Soelberg's email came on a Thursday afternoon, just as Christine had finished unpacking and putting away the last of her kitchen utensils. She clicked open the message hurriedly, hands shaking, almost unprepared to read it. But she did.

Dear Miss Daae,

After a few inquiries to a number of my colleagues, we have finally concluded that the woman in the advertisement is Madeleine St. Sauveur, a French model from the eighties. She appeared in several magazine publications, mostly throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. She still does some occasional modeling today.

Let me know if I can help you in any other way. Regards,

Dr. B Soelberg

Christine didn't bother reading the email a second time. She immediately typed *Madeleine St. Sauveur* into a search engine and felt her stomach flip when images of the woman filled her screen. Many of the articles were in French, but Christine clicked through a few in English, her heart pounding loudly, her mouth dry, and her breath short in anticipation.

Most known for simplicity in an era of bold statements and bright colors, Madeleine St. Sauveur (nee Barrineau) graced the pages of many of the world's top fashion magazines. With her defined features and iconic gaze, Madeleine first became known for her controversial marriage to multi-millionaire Henri St. Sauveur, as she was 19 and he 59 when they married. It was only after this that she began to set her mark on the fashion world.

The rest of the article was about Madeleine's career, and Christine skimmed over it, finding nothing interesting. She then typed in *Madeleine Barrineau Henri St. Sauveur marriage*. Most of the articles were, again, in French, and Christine gave an angry huff of frustration, translating page after page to read choppy, poorly-constructed and often completely unintelligible articles that she was sure made sense in French.

Still, there were a few pictures, obviously from the wedding, and Christine looked at them. Madeleine's dress was simpler than the fashion of the time, just as the earlier article had stated she was known for. The dress had long sleeves with a train that dragged behind her. The groom, Henri St. Sauveur, was obviously older, tall, his hair already mostly gray and a slight gut protruding from his dark jacket. Christine tried to discern the expression on their faces, but the picture quality was low and the angle just a bit too skewed to be able to see well enough to decide.

"Nineteen and fifty-nine," she murmured, pursing her lips at the image. That was a lot worse than what she and Erik had. Although he had never told her his age,

she was pretty sure he was nowhere near fifty-nine. At least...hopefully he wasn't. It wasn't as if she could have been able to tell by looking at him. But she was sure that he wasn't over forty yet. *Maybe?* She suddenly didn't know anymore.

Almost shaking with anxiety, she then slowly typed in *Madeleine St. Sauveur children*. An image search brought up one repeated image, that of Madeleine, still very young, posing serenely on a swing underneath a tall tree, her pregnancy obvious and her smile soft.

It took several translated pages before she was able to find something, and she read it with wide-eyed attention, her stomach rolling as she scanned the sentence over and over, her mouth dry and hands shaking.

Although Henri and Madeleine had no children live to adulthood, during the first year of their marriage Madeleine unfortunately gave birth to one stillborn son.

***Chapter 15*: Chapter 15**

Six Months Previously

She was still crying.

No. Sobbing. Wailing.

It permeated throughout the small house, driving him into his own bedroom in an attempt to escape, yet the sounds continued to come. He could have drowned her out with music, forced her into silence with just a few chords, but he did not feel he could touch his piano. Or his violin. His fingers were tainted.

Like a disgusting spider, he curled up in a corner, pressing his face into his arm, breathing deeply and closing his eyes.

It was over, now. What was he to do? Everything was ruined. He had planned so carefully, yet everything that he had feared would happen had come to pass, driving her away from him. Now she would never return if he released her. How could she not realize this? It was no longer his fault. She had cursed herself to live this life. Perhaps in time he could have trusted her enough to release her, but now...

It had all happened so suddenly, much more quickly than he had comprehended. She had emerged from her room after several days of completely ignoring him, pale, thin, and disheveled. He wanted to breathe life back into those pallid cheeks, and he had instantly offered anything she could desire. Music. Food. Entertainment. He would even obtain a deck of cards and play inane games with her if it meant she would look at him.

She looked around and then murmured, "Music."

"Music?" he had repeated stupidly, a wave of relief crashing through his wasted chest. "Yes. Of course. You are too weak to sing properly now, so I shall play for you. Would you like that?"

She nodded, and he went over to the piano, feeling as if he was able to breathe normally for the first time in days. Here she was, and she wanted music. She was not going to sequester herself in that dreary room and waste away.

Was there anything in particular she wished to hear?

She shrugged.

After a moment, he chose Verdi, hoping it would soothe her a bit with the familiarity.

He could sense her approaching, feel her small footsteps coming closer, yet he played. Then she was right behind him, and he could have wept with joy. She had not been so near him willingly in days.

Then there was touch. The smallest, lightest touch of his shoulder, a brush with her fingertips, and he turned to see.

Then there was the betrayal. The ultimate betrayal. Her hands, those small, beautiful, treacherous hands, had reached out and torn away everything he had ever worked for. With one grasp, she destroyed it all.

There had been tears. Screaming. Physical pain on both sides. He grabbed her, and she kicked his leg. He had taken a fistful of her hair, had pulled, and she had delivered a weak blow to his ribs. Then there had been blood. He took her hand and dragged it along his ruined face, her fingernails scraping away the dead skin. The blood had oozed out and dripped steadily down his ruined face.

It was only when he feared she would damage her vocal chords from shrieking that he had let her go, and she stumbled to the ground before standing and running back to the bedroom, slamming the door behind her and beginning to sob.

And now what was there to do?

Nothing. He would have to tell her that as well. It was her own fault, after all.

He did not know how long both of them remained there, her sobs gradually ceasing, his breathing gradually returning to normal. His face stung, but he did not want to look at it or treat it. Instead he tied the mask back on, hissing a little as the open, oozing wound pressed up against it. His poor Christine. He had tried. He had done all that he could.

Something buzzed in his front pocket, and he remembered the phone he had in there. Pulling it out, he saw another message from that boy. *Raoul de Chagny*. With a little red heart after his name. The boy had been sending steady text messages over the past week and had called several times. First he had been worried.

Hey! You ok? You didn't show today :(Hope everything's ok

I called you last night but no answer. Are you ok?

The boy had then been annoyed.

Are you ignoring me? Did i do something? What's wrong?

Christine, please just reply and tell me what's wrong. I didn't mean to hurt or offend you.

The texts had continued throughout the days, and each time *he* had been thrilled as the boy's messages and calls came less frequently.

This last one was the crowning piece.

Hey. I don't know what happened, but I'm sorry. I wish you would've told me that something was wrong between us. I honestly didn't think it would end like this. I love you still but I really don't get why you're doing this. Guess I'll stop bothering you, then. It was nice to hang out with you this summer.

Perhaps Christine wouldn't be so desperate to leave this place if she knew that her precious young man had apparently given her up. *He* didn't believe that,

however. He knew that as soon as Christine had a chance to be reunited with him, they would be married before he could do anything.

He stood after a few more minutes, his body stiff and aching, and he took a moment to listen. There was no more sound in the house. She had at last quieted herself, and so had he. He put the phone back into his pocket.

With heavy steps, he approached her room. The door would not be locked. It could not be locked, and so he grasped the handle and opened it, looking in with some trepidation, unsure of what he would see.

Christine was sitting on the messy, unmade bed, and he felt his heart skip several sluggish beats. She looked...utterly drained. It appeared as if everything had been drained from her. There was no color—no blood, it appeared, flowed through her veins. Her eyes were hollow and surrounded by dark circles, her magnificent hair dirty and limp about her shoulders, her clothing several days old and wrinkled. She stared at him. Her red-rimmed eyes, before so bewitching and full of life, were empty and tear-filled.

How was he to begin? He flexed his fingers a few times, attempting to get some sort of intelligence flowing back through him, but he could only stare. And as the moments ticked away, Christine slowly slid out of the bed and crawled toward him, literally crawled on her hands and knees, her head hanging low.

"Please," she whispered, stopping in front of him, her head near his feet. "Please, Erik, *I'm begging you*. Let me go. I'll do anything."

Here she was before him, kneeling at his feet, his once lively girl reduced to this. It made his stomach turn.

"You saw me," he replied, his own voice haggard.

"I'm so sorry," she said hoarsely. "I shouldn't have...I thought that..."

"You thought if you saw the monster, he would set you free?" he demanded. "You do not understand the consequences of your actions, my poor girl. You would never come back...never return to Erik now that you have seen him."

She looked up at him at last, her eyes desperate, wild, wide. "I'll do anything you say," she said, grabbing onto the bottom of his jacket. "I'll do *anything*, Erik. Just tell me what you want."

No. What he wanted was too much. It would break her down completely. *Love me*.

Her hands slowly let go of his jacket, and he could see her swallowing, her lips trembling, her breath coming in short little gasps.

"I'll..." She sucked in another breath, her voice barely above a whisper. "I'll sleep with you, if that's what you want. I will. That's it, isn't it? What you want?"

He could have slapped her. He wanted to. He could have screamed at her. Because while she was right—while he *did* want that, no matter how disgusting he was—that was not all. That was not close to everything he wanted from her. That pale, shivering little body of hers was in no way the sole thing he sought to obtain. And it infuriated him that she did not see that.

But of course she would only see *that*. She still saw him as a monster, some lustful, lecherous thing, trapping her, a young beautiful virgin, down in his cave until she at last succumbed to his carnal desires. That was how it was in the stories, was it not? It wounded him to know that she would offer up what she thought was the ultimate prize, his ultimate goal. She would bargain it away for her freedom. And then what? Then what? He would be sated, the disgusting beast, and allow her to escape, having claimed her virginity for his own. And that would be the end of the story.

There was so much more than that.

Her face was contorting into barely-suppressed wails, and she nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Okay," she said, her voice tight. "I'll..." She rose to her knees, and he watched as she grabbed the bottom of her wrinkled shirt, obviously preparing to pull it off.

"I want you to have dinner with me," he then said.

She stopped, looking back up at him. "What?"

"Come to dinner with me," he said. "As you first did in the blue dress."

"You don't want...?"

"I want you to change out of those disgusting clothes. Make yourself look somewhat presentable. I shall do the same. And then I will take you to dinner."

"And then after dinner you'll...?"

He was annoyed now, having at last forced himself out of his sluggish stupidity, and he wished that she would do the same.

"I am taking you above. And you will not run. Then we will return here, and you will sleep in this bed alone. And then tomorrow we will go out again. Again you shall sleep in your bed alone."

She blinked.

"Come," he snapped. "Stand up. Shower. Change into something clean."

"You're going to take me above?" she repeated slowly, standing. "Out of the apartment?"

"Yes," he said. "I have told you. I do not want you to be a prisoner here. But now that you have seen me, I cannot trust you. So I shall go with you. And if you make one attempt to escape, it is over. Is that understood?"

She nodded. "I promise. I promise I won't run."

"Good. I will give you thirty minutes."

During that time, he also cleaned himself up. The cuts on his face were not deep and simply needed a thorough cleaning. Then he changed his own clothing, ensured that the reservations for the restaurant were arranged, and returned to her room, knocking on the door this time.

"Christine. Your time is up."

The door opened quickly, and she stood in a simple dark green dress, her hair washed and styled, the dark circles around her eyes somehow concealed. She was still too thin and pale, but the difference made his heart lurch. *There* she was.

The drive to the restaurant was spent in mostly silence. She was pressed up against the window, looking at everything, amazement and wonder and appreciation and sadness in her gaze. He felt a little sick.

"I would not have kept you down there forever, you know," he said at last, needing her to know this. "I wish for you to enjoy the city, the world."

"How can I if you'll never trust me to do it?" she asked.

"I will be with you," he said. "I will take you anywhere you wish to go, and we will go together. Had you not been so eager to see me, perhaps I would have allowed you to go alone. Not now, however."

"That's not true," she said shortly. "You had me locked me up before I saw you."

"There was a chance that I might have learned to trust you once more. That is gone now, thanks to your curiosity and treacherous fingers."

"You've never trusted me," she said, her voice quiet. "You don't trust anyone. And you never will."

He did not reply.

The restaurant was small but exclusive, and the table they were given was near the back, sheltered and private from the rest of the tables. She was obviously disappointed but did not comment.

"You will do nothing," he reminded her. "Not one word to anyone."

"I know," she said, rubbing her eyes. "I won't do anything. I'm just glad to be out."

She poured over the menu as if it were some great literary work, looking at the waiter happily. In the past, she had let him order for her, but she was apparently overjoyed to be able to speak with someone else, and she spent a solid five minutes asking about different items from the menu, the recommendations, the beverages that he knew she would never drink, the portion sizes. It was only when *he* cleared his throat softly that she at last asked for the pasta, something he knew she had wanted all along.

It took her a long time to eat everything. Her bites were deliberate, slow, and she looked around, trying to peer around the curtain and see the others in the restaurant.

"There is no one out there," he said eventually. "Only you and I matter here."

Christine looked back at her plate. "You can't keep me isolated from other people forever."

"No," he agreed. "But I merely wish for you to learn that they do not matter. They are inconsequential."

She did not say anything for a few moments. Then she said, "I want dessert."

"You may have whatever you wish. I am happy to give it to you."

Later, as she slowly ate her strawberry ice cream, she said softly, "Erik. I'm going to say something, and you can't get mad. You have to listen to me first."

"I always listen to you," he said.

She frowned and shook her head. Then she said, "I just want Raoul to know that I'm okay. That's all. I won't tell him where I am, what's going on...anything. I just don't want him to worry. What if he's called the police? Just let me call him, text him...I'll even write him a letter if you want. Only so he knows I'm safe. And...and that I'm being taken care of."

She had said this to him here because she knew he could not make a scene. He could not raise his voice here. He had to remain calm. She was clever. But he was ahead of her in many ways.

"That is unnecessary. He has not called the police. You have nothing to worry about."

"What do you mean? How do you know?" She paused, and her face fell. "Oh. You have my phone. He's been texting, right? What did he say?"

His hand curled into a fist on his lap. "Merely that he wishes you success in your future endeavors and that he enjoyed the time spent with you as friends."

A few moments passed. "That's it?" She looked back at her dessert, her brows furrowed. "Whatever. It's not like you'd tell me the truth, no matter what he said."

She tried to eat her dessert so slowly that it melted and turned into a runny pink puddle in the bottom of the bowl. And when they returned to the apartment, he saw tears sliding down her cheeks as she walked in.

So he took her out the next night. Then the next. A faint glow returned to her cheeks. He tried to amuse her, keep her occupied. They resumed their music lessons, and some semblance of peace returned to the apartment, though it was not the same. He took her to the symphony again one night, ensuring that she was kept well away from other people.

As they waited for the audience to dissemble afterward, she looked at him, her pink dress bringing out more color in her cheeks. She was achingly beautiful.

"How long have I been with you?" she asked.

He tapped his fingers on the arm of the chair, deliberating for a moment. Then he said, "Two weeks."

With a sigh, she looked back to the nearly-empty theater, and he used the few moments to admire her long hair, falling down her back in delightful curls.

They sat in silence until the seats had cleared, and then they left. As they walked through the halls, he kept close to her, though there was no real need. He knew she would not try to run anywhere. He simply enjoyed being near her.

"Perhaps I can arrange another small concert for you," he said, opening a door for her. "I have been meaning to introduce you to Shostakovich. I believe Russian would suit your voice."

She didn't reply, expressing neither excitement nor reluctance, and he continued.

"Your last one was an extraordinary success. I see no reason to stop now. It would mean much hard work on our part, but I think we could have something arranged and prepared within two weeks. Would that please you?"

She glanced up at him as they crossed over the empty foyer.

"What about my schooling?" she said quietly.

That was something he had considered but had not decided on. There were plenty of universities in and near the city that she could attend, but that would mean she would go to her classes alone. There was also the option of online schooling and classes, but that was somewhat limiting. He did not want to limit her. He wanted her to thrive.

"If it is important to you, I will see that you finish your degree," he said finally, and he could see that his vague answer displeased her. "But you should consider changing your area of emphasis. Really, Christine. Social work? You deserve so much more."

"I could help people with that degree," she said shortly. "What do *you* think should I major in, then? A Bachelor of Arts in *Accepting Imprisonment*?"

Her sarcasm did not amuse him, and he ignored her, instead focusing on the fact that there was still somewhat of a crowd outside of the doors. It was late in the evening, and it was sufficiently dark. Still, he stiffened a little, glancing at her in an unspoken warning.

The night air was warm, and there was dull noise as people conversed inately, lingering after the performance. He ushered her around a large group, resisting the urge to touch her in order to keep her close. The car was not far, and he was anxious to conceal himself.

"Christine!"

There was a sudden shout, and *he* whipped around, feeling a heated wave of indescribable rage sweep over him as he saw *that boy*, struggling through the crowd, obviously having seen her.

And she saw him as well.

Turning, she gasped. "Raoul!"

In an instant, he seized her arm and pulled her along, causing her to stumble as she walked. He did not let go, not even when he felt her own fingers attempting to pry his away from her.

"Erik! Let go! I can walk! I wasn't going to run!"

The boy's shouts followed them. "Christine! Wait!"

They reached the car finally, and he opened the door and nearly shoved her in, slamming it shut behind her and going to the driver's side. Her face was again pressed up against the window, though she made no attempt to leave the car. Ramming it into gear, he drove, his heart racing. And to his annoyance and dismay, she began to cry again. A place behind his right eye started to throb.

"Stop crying," he snapped shortly. "Why must you always cry? You only cry for *him*. Never for Erik. Not for the hideous monster."

"But you didn't even let me talk to him!" she said, still turning in the seat, trying to look for the boy. "I just wanted to tell him that I'm okay! I wasn't going to run!"

"I find that especially difficult to believe," he said.

"That's not my fault!" she cried, at last sitting correctly in her seat. "You'll never believe anything I say."

"And that is *my* fault, then?" he growled. "My fault that you have proven yourself over and over to be untrustworthy? Deceitful?"

"You just hear what you want to hear," she said, wiping her face. She paused and then buried her face in her hands as a fresh bout of tears overcame her. He could have been driven insane by them.

Her tears had not stopped by the time they returned to their apartment. Before she could run to her room, he spoke, in a desperate attempt to explain.

"I never wished for it all," he said. Perhaps now she would understand. He did not *want* to do this. He had never wanted to love so desperately. Before her, he had been...resolved. He had known his role in the world. Now he felt he knew nothing. "I never wished to be drawn in by you. And yet that is what happened."

She stood there, still in tears, her head hanging and her thin, bare shoulders shaking.

"What, Christine?" he said, his voice rising slightly. "How can you cry when you are the one who holds *me* prisoner? I wish I could let you out of this miserable place and set you free! Yet I cannot...not as long as I love you."

She did not stay after that. Instead she ran and slammed the door shut, and he allowed her the rest of the night to cry and calm herself. He did the same.

The next morning, he was relieved when she appeared from her room, though he was disappointed she was wearing wrinkled clothing and had not managed her

hair. She ate her breakfast quietly, subdued, and then said, "Are we never going out again?"

He placed a cup of blueberry tea in front of her. "We may go out as often as you wish."

A flush appeared on her cheeks, and she nodded, pulling the steaming cup closer.

They did not go out that night, however. He was surprised when she did not besiege him with pleas, but she instead sat on the sofa in the front room and listened quietly as he played for her.

After another few days, he asked if she wished to go out, and she nodded wordlessly.

"It might be a bit late for a conventional dinner," he said to her as they went. "But you may order whatever you like."

"Thank you," she said softly.

She had been quiet the past few days. She was not ignoring him anymore, but she did not speak much. He tried to resist the urge to force her to speak, to say something, telling himself that at least she was not holed up in that room anymore, sobbing hourly and refusing to look at him. Perhaps she was merely thinking. Perhaps she was attempting to become accustomed to this way of life.

At the restaurant, she did not wish for much. It simply pleased her to be out of the apartment, and he was impatient for the day when he could allow her to do such things without resentment toward him, to be here with him only because she wished it and not because he was required to be with her.

"You have never told me whether or not you wished to do another concert," he said after several minutes of silence. "I will not arrange anything if you do not want to."

"I don't know," she said, playing with her fork. "I'll think about it."

He spoke about her voice for the rest of the evening, how pleased he was with the progress she was making, how her talents were only growing, and how much he still had to teach her. She merely nodded occasionally, appearing lost in thought most of the night.

She did not want any dessert that night, and so they left, stepping out of the doors of the restaurant and into the night. The street was still moderately-busy for how late the evening had become, high-end bars and other restaurants still open for a little while longer.

Just as he was about to lead her to the car, a gruff voice next to him spoke.

"Got any spare change?"

He nearly pulled out his lasso, beyond shocked that someone had addressed him, and he turned to see a filthy vagabond holding out a grubby hand expectantly. Homeless people usually did not wander these streets, and they certainly made a habit of avoiding *him*. He curled his lip a little before wondering if Christine would appreciate it if he exhibited some amount of charity and generosity.

Reaching into his pocket to pull out his wallet, he glanced over and saw, to his further amazement, that there was no Christine next to him.

Only her shoes. Her black high-heeled shoes, lying there forlornly.

Looking around, he then spotted her some fifty feet away, sprinting up the sidewalk. She looked over her shoulder. Her eyes were wide, pleading, desperate, terrified...*apologetic*.

And he simply watched.

He watched as she ran, aware that he could have easily caught up with her, knowing just what she intended to do.

She would run until she thought herself safe, somehow contact the boy, and she would plead with him to rescue her. And he would. The boy would come, thinking that he was some hero in a horror story. She would tell him the gruesome tales of her imprisonment. He would vow to spirit her away where the *monster* would not be able to find them. She would fall into his arms, sobbing and fainting.

This was the end, then. She had chosen to put the final pieces in play. No matter how much she accused him of controlling her, of never letting her have a choice, she was the one choosing everything.

After pulling out his wallet, he absentmindedly placed a hundred dollar bill into the awaiting dirty hand, ignoring the profuse thanks. *He* bent down, gathered up her abandoned shoes, and walked to the car. It was time, and he had to prepare.

Chapter 16: Chapter 16

Baruga brought up a good question in a review. The "x months previously" is in relation to the current time in the story and not to a fixed point in time. Thanks for the all of the reviews! They've been really encouraging. Enjoy the chapter!

A crackly, accented voice came on over the speakers.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have been cleared to land into Charles de Gaulle. All connecting flight information can be found in the terminal. Thank you for flying with us today."

The sky was gray and gloomy-looking, and Christine craned her neck, trying to see the city, but the angle of the plane made it impossible. All she could see was the big white wing of the plane, sticking up in the air. Her stomach lurched a little as the plane began to descend, and she grabbed the armrest, still unused to flying.

It wasn't only the flying that made her nervous. She had waited for this for several weeks, and she had no idea what to expect. Just like with London, Christine feared that the whole trip would be for nothing. Again, though, she told herself that it really wouldn't be for nothing, as she was in Paris, and if her research didn't work out, she would at least be able to see the city.

There was the long line through border control and then the wait for her suitcase, and after an hour she was in a taxi, on the way to her hotel.

She couldn't help but feel somehow connected to this place, even though she had never been here before. Raoul had been from Paris, and if her assumptions were correct, then so was Erik...

As the taxi drove closer to the city and the buildings began to take shape, she continued to stare, a little unbelieving that she was actually here.

Raoul had promised her many times to take her to Paris.

"You'll love it," he had said one warm afternoon in Central Park. "There's always so much to do, and there are an insane amount of museums that you'd love."

"When was the last time you went back?" she said.

"A couple years ago, for Phil's fortieth birthday." He shrugged. "The party was awkward, but it was great to be in the city again. I didn't want to leave."

She had reached for his hand and given him a smile. "Well, I'm glad you did, because if you hadn't we never would have met."

A dog had run up to them then, a huge, furry kind, and Christine had given a small yelp and ducked behind Raoul, shaking.

"What's wrong?" he said, laughing. "He's nice! Look, he just wants you to pet him."

She had shaken her head emphatically. "I don't like them," she said, grabbing onto him tightly, putting him between her and the dog that was drooling complacently on Raoul's lap. "Tell it to go away!"

Luckily, the owner called the dog back, and it trotted away dutifully. Raoul then looked at her in concern.

"You really don't like dogs?" he had said.

She shook her head again. "No...not the big ones. The little ones are okay. A big dog bit me when I was little. They're...yeah. Not nice."

"No St. Bernards for us, then," he said, smiling a little. "I'll get us a little one after we get married."

Christine smiled weakly at the memory. There were no dogs in her future, because there was no future with Raoul anymore. It was strange to her how she had somehow ended up in Paris anyway, yet she was completely alone. She was much more nervous than when she had gone to London. At least in London they spoke English. Here...the only French that Raoul had taught her was 'baguette' as a joke.

She was grateful that the hotel staff spoke English and that she was able to check in without any problems. As she had done in London, she had decided to do what she came here to do first. After that she would sightsee a little.

Christine lay in the large bed, *Paradise Lost* sitting on the nightstand beside her. The picture of Madeleine St. Sauveur was beside it, and Christine felt her heart flutter a little in anticipation of what she would be doing tomorrow.

She closed her eyes and rolled over, trying not to think too much of just what might happen. Maybe it really was all for nothing. Maybe Madeleine would have no idea what Christine was talking about, and Christine would be left with another dead end.

Still...her stomach chilled a little at the prospect of what might happen if Madeleine knew exactly what Christine was talking about. She had already learned that Erik had killed people...What other terrifying secrets had he kept from her? What could Madeleine tell her that might hurt her even more?

She had thought of that constantly over the past few weeks...of the fact that Erik had killed people. It still hurt, and it was still somewhat hard to take in. Dr. Khan's assurances were always there, though. *Erik was a very good friend. He did things that I can't excuse, but he also did a lot of good.* But that didn't justify what he had done.

She had then been annoyed at herself. What had she expected to find? Some sunshiney past of Erik's, discovering that he had been some sort of good, upstanding, law-abiding citizen? Christine had suspected from the very beginning, perhaps unconsciously, that Erik was troubled and probably hadn't led the most lawful life. Finding that out had been one of the reasons she had started the whole journey. To find out what Erik had done. To try to understand why he had done to her what he had. And if he had murdered people, then maybe things like kidnapping and imprisonment were petty crime to him.

Hadn't she defended him against Raoul when he had wanted to call the police? *Erik is just confused. He's not...a bad guy. He just doesn't know.* Christine had no doubt that Erik had loved her desperately, insanely, and yet he had not known how to show her. But his killing people had been before all that, so what excuse was there for it? Dr. Khan had said that there wasn't one, and she agreed. But still...

Sighing loudly, she rolled over again, pulling the blankets up to her chin and refusing to let tears come. She was tired, and her thoughts were going around in circles. She had thought of every possibility during the past couple weeks, and she just couldn't think about it anymore. She had to focus on what she would be doing tomorrow. It wouldn't help her to be sleepy and sluggish. She had a feeling she would need to be alert, awake, and attentive.

The appointment wasn't until the afternoon, and so Christine allowed herself to sleep in just a bit, waking without an alarm to a sunny late-winter day. She could hear the soft growl of traffic, and she lay in the large bed for a little while longer before getting up and stretching.

She felt confident enough to call the front desk and order a large breakfast, which she then ate at the small table by the window, wrapped up in a thick blanket and feeling a little silly but somehow luxuriously self-indulgent, sitting there by the large, clean window in her pajamas and unhurriedly eating a Parisian breakfast. She then paused. This was the type of life Erik had wanted to give to her. He had said it multiple times. He wanted to give her the world and all the finery that came with it. For a bizarre minute, she imagined him in the room, sitting across from her, maybe with a newspaper. He would comment on something that he was reading, and she would make a face in response, and he would give her one of his rare, soft smiles.

At the thought, Christine immediately put her croissant down and leapt to her feet, her heart pounding. That was not something to ever think about. Dropping the blanket on the bed, she went to the large bathroom and readied herself, taking great care with her hair and makeup. The outfit she had picked especially for this afternoon was tucked neatly in her bag, and she pulled it out, eyeing it critically. How did design students dress? An image search had revealed a wide variety of styles, all apparently effortless and chic, and Christine had fretted but had known that an outfit couldn't stop her from doing what she had to.

It had taken several drafts of very thorough and well thought-out emails before she had felt confident sending one. Madeleine St. Sauveur had a business contact email address that she had used, and it had taken four days before she had received her reply.

Miss Daae,

We thank you for your interest in centering your final project around M. St. Sauveur. As an influential and highly-respected icon of fashion, M. St. Sauveur would, as you have stated, make a compelling figure for your project. As such, M. St. Sauveur has granted her permission to hold an interview in her home on 24 February. We ask that you plan your interview for no longer than an hour, as M. St. Sauveur already has a pressing engagement scheduled for that evening. No photographs are to be taken, and the interview is not to be recorded, either by audio or video.

Following this was a list of other things she was forbidden to do, like use the interview for profit, disclose the address of Madeleine's house, or pass along any information to other students for projects. The next paragraph read:

In replying to this email with a confirmation of your presence in M. St. Sauveur's home on 24 February, you are explicitly agreeing to these terms. Failure to comply will result in strict and swift legal action. M. St. Sauveur looks forward to meeting you.

It had ended with the address and the name of the representative of the modeling agency, and Christine had almost changed her mind about going in the first place. Legal action against her sounded intimidating, and if they were to find out that she wasn't a design student in the first place, that she wasn't studying abroad in Paris, that she didn't actually have her senior project, that she didn't want to talk to Madeleine about her career, but about her possible son...

Still, after thinking about it for a day, she had replied, confirming that she would be there at the appointed time and at the appointed place. Technically, she wouldn't be breaking any of the terms laid out for her. If worst came to worst, she would hire some kind of lawyer. Christine just hoped that it wouldn't go that far.

It was a clear day, and Christine saw that as a good sign as she left the hotel and climbed into a taxi, wordlessly handing over the address she had written on a scrap of paper earlier. The driver nodded and drove off, Christine clutching her bag and again staring out of the window. She wondered whether Raoul would have had things to say about this particular street, whether he had ever been here or not.

The drive was almost twenty minutes, and Christine was happy to simply sit in silence and look.

She also couldn't help but wonder where Raoul's parents had died.

Christine could still remember sitting there in her class as an eight year-old, staring with all the rest of the kids at the boy who shyly stood up front, and their teacher had explained to them that he had just moved from France to live with his aunt and uncle, and that they all needed to be nice to him and be his friend.

A few days later, out in the playground, a few kids had begun to tease Christine and had even pulled off the red scarf she was wearing. Christine had started to cry, and before she realized what was happening, the new boy had snatched her scarf back and told the other kids in his broken English that they had better leave her alone. They had laughed, but they had left.

After that, Christine had followed him everywhere. If Raoul had been annoyed at first, he simply let her do it, and they grew to be actual friends within a few weeks.

"My mom died in a car crash, too," she had told him one day as they were on the swingset.

"You have a papa," Raoul replied.

"I know," she had said simply.

He had been transferred to a prestigious private school two years later, and though he and Christine still saw each other and played together on occasion, they eventually grew apart. Raoul hadn't spoken much about his parents during their first few years together, maybe still unable to process the grief, and during the last summer as they had dated, he hadn't really mentioned them at all, maybe having forgotten what they were like after so many years. It made her sad to think about it. Perhaps if they had actually come to Paris together, he would have talked about them more.

The taxi took her to an upscale-looking neighborhood, and Christine was again a little awe-inspired. It looked like something out of a lush movie.

Thankfully, she was on time, and she climbed the steps and timidly knocked on the door. She had been thinking of this and preparing for it for a few weeks, now, but it was still intimidating to stand there in the February afternoon, waiting.

The door opened, and Christine's heart leapt before quickly falling. It was not Madeleine St. Sauveur. The woman who answered was short with light hair and was looking at her quizzically.

"Oh—I'm sorry," Christine said, glancing around at the houses around her in confusion. "I'm looking for Madeleine St. Sauveur..."

The woman nodded in reply. "*Oui*," she said quickly, gesturing for Christine to enter. Confused and relieved, Christine did so. She stepped into a large, elegant foyer, and after a moment of confusion realized that the woman was waiting for her to take off her coat. Hastily, she did so, handing it over.

"Madame is expecting you," the woman said, her accent thick. "Over here, please."

The apartment was sleek but somehow warm, with minimal decorations and yet enough to make an impression. Everything was light, airy, and in soft colors, creating a bright atmosphere. The sitting room she was led to had a few white chairs, and she was gestured to sit on one. Beside it was a low table with various pastries and other sweets laid out. Two teacups were there as well.

"I will tell Madame," the woman then said, leaving the room.

Christine sat nervously, crossing and then uncrossing her legs, looking out of the wide windows on the other side of the room and wondering if maybe Erik had looked out of these same windows once in his life. She then wondered, for the hundredth time, if she was trying to put two pieces of a puzzle together that simply did not fit.

The sound came of high heels against the hardwood floors, and Christine looked up to see *her* walking in. Madeleine St. Sauveur. Awkwardly, unsure of what else to do, Christine stood as well. Madeleine approached and smiled softly, and Christine held out her hand and then felt stupid. Looking surprised, Madeleine nonetheless shook it briefly.

"Thank you so, so much for meeting with me," Christine said, resuming her seat after Madeleine sat across from her and indicated that she should sit as well.

"It isn't a problem," Madeleine replied, her English accented but clear.

Christine glanced up at her again. The woman was beautiful. She had either aged gracefully or had had some work done—Christine suspected a combination of both. There were minimal wrinkles around her eyes and mouth, and her hair was still dark, shiny, and long. Even without the heels, Christine suspected that Madeleine would have towered over her. And her clothing was fashionable, sleek, and minimalist in design. Even though she had tried to dress up for the day to look the part of a design student, Christine felt underdressed.

Clearing her throat, Christine opened her notebook, suddenly unsure of how to begin. She had thought and mentally rehearsed this part so many times, and now she was drawing somewhat of a blank. Tapping the pen on the paper, she gave a nervous smile to Madeleine, who was waiting with a look of infinite, almost condescending patience on her face.

"Well..." Christine began stupidly, blushing deeply.

"I am happy to be helping you with your project, Miss Daae," Madeleine said. "I am sure it will be very well-received."

"Heh. I hope so," she said, pushing an errant curl behind her ear, desperately hoping that Madeleine wouldn't ask further about it. What was she supposed to say about a nonexistent project about a subject Christine had no knowledge in? She gave a brief smile. "I'm just glad you agreed to help me."

Madeleine nodded and then looked at her expectantly. Christine wondered if there would be more small talk, but maybe Madeleine had had many interviews throughout her life and had grown tired of the pointless small talk that preceded it. Sitting up a little straighter, Christine did her best to try to sound professional, like she actually knew what she was doing.

"Um, when did you begin modeling?"

Madeleine raised her dark eyebrow but humored the question. "When I was twenty."

"And...you still model today?" Her blush was deepening. She could only hope that either Madeleine didn't notice or maybe thought Christine was just nervous to interview her.

"Occasionally," Madeleine said. "I walked last year in Paris Fashion Week. You saw it, no? What a divine collection. And I was personally invited by the designer."

"Yes," Christine said, suddenly beginning to wonder what she would do when Madeleine saw through this obvious farce. "It was...so beautiful. Inspirational."

Madeleine nodded and then gestured to the small table. "Please take something."

"Oh...thank you." Christine took an éclair and wished that Madeleine would take something as well. However, the woman simply watched, her dark eyes somehow empty and yet guarded at the same time. Christine had no idea what to think.

"Uh, so. Where do you get your inspiration from?" she then said, shoving the rest of the éclair in her mouth and holding up the pen, as if poised for writing.

"Many things," Madeleine said. "I have always loved the art of simplicity. There is so much clutter today—too much. Simple things can be so poetic. That is what I love. I go out of the city often now to get inspiration there. There is too much here in Paris sometimes. It is not good for the soul."

Christine nodded, pretending to write. Then she said, "Do you get inspiration from...others around you? Friends? Family, maybe?"

"It was my late husband who inspired me to start modeling," Madeleine said. "Henri was my inspiration in the beginning. He died seven years after we married. And it was very difficult for me, but I continued to work in his memory."

Her heart pounding, Christine then said, hoping to sound as nonchalant as possible, "Did you two have any children? Was there any inspiration there?"

Madeleine frowned a little at that, and Christine's heart skipped a beat.

"There was a stillborn son one year after Henri and I married," Madeleine said, somewhat coolly. "That is common knowledge I believe, Mademoiselle Daae."

"I'm sorry," Christine said hurriedly. "I just...um, my French is still really bad, and most of the information about you is in French, so..."

Madeleine looked somewhat mollified by that. "Yes, well. That is what happened, I am sad to say."

Not daring to look at Madeleine and instead staring at her notepad that was covered in nonsensical scribbles, Christine then said, "Can I ask what his name was?"

A very long silence followed. Then Madeleine said, "He is buried not far from here. Perhaps you wish to go to the grave and take pictures if you are so interested, Mademoiselle!"

"I don't mean to be disrespectful," Christine said, her cheeks heated and red. "I just wanted to know if maybe you were influenced by him in any way. In your work, in your decisions..."

"I do not want to talk about this," Madeleine said shortly. "It was over thirty years ago. It was sad, but he is dead, and I have moved on."

Christine looked up and saw Madeleine's gaze, flashing with annoyance, anger, and warning, and she felt her stomach flip.

Erik had given her that look before. The same expression in his eyes, the way his jaw would set. It was as if...he were looking at her right now, daring her to say something.

Her hands shaking, she folded them in her lap and said, doing her best to sound calm and confident, "Ms. St. Sauveur, I don't want to waste your time. I know you probably don't want me here in the first place. I just have some questions, and then I promise I'll leave."

Madeleine frowned deeply, her eyes still guarded. "What do you mean?"

Christine took a deep breath, steeling herself, and then said quietly, "I just want to know about Erik."

It was so silent, so still, that Christine could hear the faint ticking of a clock in another room. Madeleine hid her reaction a bit too slowly. Christine could see the shock, the widening of her eyes, her nostrils flaring in anger, her lips parting as she softly gasped, and the way her long fingers twitched in her lap. And as fast as it had come over Madeleine, it was gone. Everything was hidden again behind her calm, guarded gaze.

"Who?" she said at last.

"Your son," Christine replied. "Erik."

"My son is dead," Madeleine said. "If you insist on talking about this, I will ask you to leave."

"That's not true," she said, gripping her hands together to stop them from shaking. "I saw him last year in New York. I know who he is...I know what he looks like."

Madeleine immediately leapt to her feet. "Get out!" she spat, pointing to the door. "Get out of my home!"

"All I want is to know what happened," Christine said, leaning back, her heart racing. "Please."

"I will call the police!" Madeleine threatened loudly. "Get out now!"

"I spent all last summer with him," she said. "Please believe me. He was—"

"Marie!" Madeleine shouted, her voice echoing throughout the airy room. "*Marie!*"

"Please—please, Madeleine," Christine begged. "Just tell me what he—"

"My son is dead!" Madeleine shrieked, her accent stronger. "He is *dead*, you—!"

The short woman came into the room then, looking between them with wide eyes. "Madame?" she said timidly.

"Call the police at once," Madeleine said, speaking in English so Christine would know exactly what was happening. "Mademoiselle Daae refuses to leave."

Christine felt herself begin to panic. What if she was actually put in jail? Even if she was removed from the house with only some kind of verbal warning, there was no way she would ever be able to talk to Madeleine again. Quickly, blood rushing to her head, Christine stood as well. She was desperate, unsure of what else to do, and so she said the only thing she could think of that might make Madeleine listen to her and answer her questions.

A moment of silence, and then finally, her voice trembling but clear:

"If you don't answer my questions, I will tell everyone that he's still alive."

***Chapter 17*: Chapter 17**

A ringing silence filled the room, and Madeleine's eyes flashed, her jaw clenching.

"What did you just say?" she said, her voice low, cold.

Christine felt a wave of fear wash over her, but she did her best to appear confident, serious. "I said I'll tell everyone that he's still alive if you don't answer my questions."

In two short strides, Madeleine walked over and slapped her, hard, across the cheek. Dazed, Christine stumbled back a few steps, clutching her stinging cheek and nearly tripping over the chair behind her. Tears sprang to her eyes.

"You stupid girl," Madeleine snarled.

Christine squeezed her eyes shut, refusing to let any tears fall, and then stood straight up to look at the woman across from her. "I'll tell everyone he's alive," she repeated, her voice trembling but clear. "I will. I know who he is. I know what he looks like."

Madeleine let out a hiss and quickly raised her hand again. Christine ducked, throwing her hands out to protect herself, but the second blow never came. Several long seconds of silence passed. She glanced up and saw Madeleine staring at her, her brows furrowed, her fists clenched.

"What tabloid trash are you from?" she then said.

"What?" Christine blinked, blankly rubbing her warm cheek. "I'm not...No. I'm not a reporter."

"Are you recording this conversation?"

"No." She shook her head quickly. "You can...search me, or whatever. I don't have anything on me. I just want answers."

"How did you find me?"

"There was...a picture of you." Christine swallowed back further tears and fear. "I found it in his house."

A brief expression of confusion crossed Madeleine's face. Then she said, "No one would believe you, you know. And why would they care? It has been over thirty years. No one cares about that ugly little thing."

Her cheek still hurt, and Christine felt an intense rush of anger and dislike. "Why wouldn't they believe me?" she replied shortly. "What will they find if they dig up the grave? The coffin is empty. And I know other people who know him as well." Christine swallowed and continued. "I think...I think a lot of people would care. It would be a big story for a magazine. I'm not from a magazine, but I could find someone who actually is. A deformed son kept secret for over thirty years by a famous model..." Christine felt her confidence grow a bit as Madeleine's expression darkened with each sentence. "Maybe they would even make a movie out of it. You'd be even more famous."

"You..." It appeared that Madeleine was struggling to find the right insult in English, and she simply stood there, her face etched with cold fury. Christine tried one more time.

"Please. I promise I won't tell anyone else. I swear. This is only for me. It's just...for me."

Madeleine's lips thinned, and she examined closely Christine for several long moments before saying shortly, "Marie, please leave us."

"Would Madame still like me to call...?" Marie said in her heavily-accented English.

"No. Just leave."

Marie gave a brief half-curtsey and then left, looking highly confused. Christine stood there, suddenly wondering if Madeleine was going to do something worse than slap her. Horrified, she looked around for a weapon and then saw a small knife on the table, obviously meant for cutting bread and pastries. But maybe if she was desperate...

"Sit down, Christine Daae." Madeleine pointed to the chair.

"Why?" She continued to stand, her hands slightly raised in defense.

"Because we are going to talk, just as you wish." Madeleine sat down herself, and only after a few moments did Christine inch around the chair and sit down as well.

A few more moments of silence passed between them, Madeleine examining her closely, her eyes narrowed. Christine could tell she was thinking hard, and she clutched her notebook again, flipping it open to the first pages. Would all of her questions listed be answered here?

Name: Erik ?

Birthplace: ?

Birthday: ?

Family: ?

Madeleine sighed. "So, you have met the little monster," she said at last.

Christine's eyes widened. Her heart thudded loudly in her chest. "So Erik is actually your—?"

Madeleine held up her hand quickly. "Do not say his name here. And yes, of course he is, *imbécile*. Why else would we be having this conversation?" She sat there, staring carefully at Christine. "Do you know what that thing would do to my career, if he came back now? I would be ruined."

"I'm sure Erik wants as little to do with you as you want to do with him," Christine said, ignoring Madeleine's warning look as she said his name. "All I want are some answers."

"Answers to *what*, then, you silly girl?" Madeleine snapped. "If you are writing for some tabloid, you already have more than enough for a story. It would sell very well. It would be sensationalist. Just what these horrid people love." She glanced out of the large window, still glaring. "That is all they want, you know? They do not appreciate beautiful things."

"I told you, I'm not a reporter," Christine said again. "I'm not even a design student."

"That is obvious," Madeleine said, eyeing Christine's outfit distastefully.

Christine nearly rolled her eyes but decided against it, not wanting to make Madeleine even angrier. Erik had been particular about clothing as well, and it was all just...a bit too similar right now. She was unsure if she wanted to find out any more similarities between them.

"I'm a student from America," she then said. "He spent all last summer teaching me to sing. He's an amazing musician, did you know that? He's the best musician I've ever heard."

"These are not real questions," Madeleine said, unaffected. "If this is all you came to tell me, then this sham interview is over."

"I'm only trying to..." Christine shook her head. "Whatever. I'm just saying, I spent a lot of time with him, and he never told me anything about himself. About you."

"It seems he knows well enough to leave the past alone. But I always knew he was clever. You would think having a...*face* like that would cause some kind of brain damage, but..." A long pause followed, Madeleine trailing off and appearing to go into deep thought again. Then she looked back to Christine and snapped, "I suppose it is true the other way around, as well. Someone with a pretty face can apparently be as stupid as a rock."

Christine blushed but didn't retaliate. As long as Madeleine's insults were verbal and not physical, she felt she could handle them. Madeleine was just rude. Just like Erik.

"Um." She took another little breath. "When was he born?"

Madeleine furrowed her dark brows and then shrugged elegantly. "Sometime in early spring. March, I believe. Perhaps April. I don't remember the date or year."

"There's no birth certificate?"

"Do you think I am stupid enough to have the birth certificate of my dead son lying around?" Madeleine snapped. "He was born at home. That was the only lucky thing about it all. I could not imagine what might have happened if he had been born in a hospital. I would have killed myself."

"Then what?"

"Then *what*?" Madeleine said. "The parasite survived somehow. He grew up. Then he left. That was it."

"When did he leave?" Christine said, heart still pounding loudly. "How old was he?"

"Perhaps ten or eleven," Madeleine said, her tone making it clear that she was still extremely angry about the entire conversation. "I do not know exactly. But it was better for both of us."

"And Erik's father..."

A hard silence came again, and then Madeleine said shortly, "What about him?"

"Well...what was he like?" She nervously twisted the silver bracelet around her wrist, watching Madeleine's ever-changing expressions. Anger, confusion, disdain, scorn, contempt, indignation...

"Like any other old rich man. He hated the sight of him, of course. But Henri was able to escape. He would spend weeks abroad—at villas in the Caribbean, in Greece, always with some new eighteen year-old whore...The disgusting pig. And then he drank himself to death. It was a relief in many ways. But it also meant that I was completely alone with that little demon. I was the only one who knew about him."

Christine could feel her head spinning a little with all of the painful information.

"How did you keep him a secret for so long?" she said.

"It was easy when he was young," Madeleine replied. "He was kept in the basement with whatever he wanted, as long as it would keep him quiet." Her voice was cold, cool, and careless, as if she were describing some ruined chair that needed to be put in the basement instead of a little boy. "But then Henri finally died, and the ugly thing grew wild. He was a horrid little beast. One night I went downstairs to feed him, and he had somehow gotten a liter of red paint and threw it all over the new white Helmut Lang dress I was wearing. I could have killed him, the toad."

Christine might have laughed had she not been horrified at what she was hearing. "And he didn't have any friends?"

"Of course not," Madeleine said, fixing her with a condescending glare. "I could not have it...He was supposed to be dead. And who would want to be friends with that? "

"But he was with you for so long," Christine continued, still trying to understand. "And he was all alone the whole time?"

"Who knows what he was doing," came the sharp reply. "I came home one night after a photoshoot and found that he had locked my brand new line from Yves Saint Laurent in a trunk with two dozen rats! There were no rats in the house. So he must have left and gotten them from the gutter, a rat himself. He might have left that house dozens of times as he grew. I do not know, and when I found my new line completely ruined...That was his last day."

"You threw him out?" Christine said angrily, indignant.

"He wished to leave just as much as I wanted him out," Madeleine said coldly. "He was old enough to be wandering Paris, collecting his disease-ridden little

friends, and so he was old enough to be on his own. I gave him one hundred francs and made him promise to never return. He was not to tell anyone anything. And then he left."

"And he's never contacted you since?"

Madeleine shook her head, her eyebrow raised in something that looked like a touch of triumph.

"Until now, that is," she then said, looking intently at Christine. "If you really are not from a tabloid, Mademoiselle Daae, what are you actually doing here?"

A few moments passed, and Christine looked at the thin, tall woman in front of her before realizing that she didn't want Madeleine to know anything about her relationship with Erik.

"I told you," Christine then said. "He was my voice teacher last summer, but he would never tell me anything about himself. I was just curious." She scratched her wrist, glancing down to her notebook. "And I was in Paris anyway and just wondered...I knew you wouldn't talk to me if I told you the real reason I wanted to see you. He doesn't know I'm here."

"At least he has *some* sense. I do not ever expect to see his horrid face again."

"You're a terrible person," Christine said before she could stop herself. Then she put a hand over her mouth, terrified that Madeleine would jump up and start screaming or hit her again. Instead, she gave a very slight smile.

"And yet here I sit with everything I've ever wanted," Madeleine said coolly. "What do you have, Mademoiselle Daae, besides discount shoes and an unflattering haircut?"

Christine blushed deeply.

"Do you think you could have loved that demon?" Madeleine said. "That you could have perhaps been a better mother to him? No. He did not need a mother. I gave him exactly what he needed."

Feeling her stomach turn, Christine sat there for several long moments. She felt the sudden urge to escape, to get away from the unfeeling woman sitting across from her, and she closed her notebook and cleared her throat softly.

"Thanks for your time," she said, as if they had just ended a pleasant job interview. "But I have to go now."

Madeleine stood with her, and Christine was again struck by her height.

"Have a pleasant afternoon, Miss Daae," Madeleine said. "I hope your *project* goes well." She walked with her across the room, saying softly, "If I hear that you said anything to anyone, I will have you killed. Do you understand?"

"This—this was just for me," Christine said, her stomach turning at the threat that did not sound like a jest. "I don't want to tell anyone."

"I hope that's true, Miss Daae," she replied, her gaze hard and cold. She put a hand on Christine's shoulder, her grip tight and strong, and another on her cheek. Christine flinched against the long fingers. "I trust it goes without saying that you are to never contact me again."

"That's the last thing I'd ever want to do," Christine said.

"I am glad to hear it." Madeleine patted her cheek twice—too hard to be an actual pat but too soft to be a real slap, and Christine winced, her cheek still stinging.

Marie was in the entryway and wordlessly opened the door, handing over her coat and giving her a half-curtsy as Christine left. The wind had picked up, and Christine tugged her coat on and buttoned it up to her chin, glancing over her shoulder one more time at the tall woman who stood watching her, her eyes dark and emotionless. Shivering, Christine looked away back toward the street and simply began to walk, her mind crowded and her heart pounding loudly with each footstep.

Colors were swirling in his vision, and he blinked rapidly, unable to discern. Each movement felt like torture against his hot, feverish skin, but he stumbled on, his legs seeming to work without his brain. The air around him was stifling, muggy, humid beyond belief, and he choked on it, his clothing sticking to his skin. It was stained beyond belief and ragged, nearly threadbare and drenched with sweat. Didn't he have another one? Somewhere...? Yes. He did. Perhaps he would find it and actually clean himself up. That should stop his head from spinning, his limbs from aching, his skin from burning. Simply—simply...

He tripped over something, fell to his knees, and without further ado vomited onto the dirt in front of him. With a pained groan, he began to tremble, the humid air creeping back into his lungs and smothering him. If only he could get to his shelter. Perhaps stripping himself would cool his body temperature. As it was, he was still lucid enough to know that that was not acceptable anywhere outside the privacy of a locked room. His stomach cramped with hunger, and yet he could see the remains of his meager meal from the day previously on the ground in front of him. The hunger turned to nausea, and he retched again.

A glass of water. Perhaps that would settle his stomach and cool the wretched fever. Water. Clean clothing. All of this not far from him, yet the mere thought of standing and walking seemed to cause his body to shut down in protest, and he could only manage to slink off to the side, away from the main path, hidden in the underbrush. Insects buzzed around dully, and he allowed his eyes to slip close for several minutes. His mouth was sticky and slick with bile. The headache was worsening. His entire body was fatigued, in pain, wasted away and rotting. His wish had come true, then...

There was a discomfort against his hipbone, and he shifted slightly before reaching a hand down to pull out a cell phone, which he stared at blearily for several long moments. Then, as if his fingers were working without his consent, he opened it and dialed before holding it to his ear, lying on the ground, dirt and leaves and moss and every other foul thing sticking to his exposed skin and damp clothing.

The phone rang shrilly in his ear four times before a slight *click* was heard, followed by a muffled, irritated, "*Hello?*"

He paused. "Nadir."

The answer was immediate, and he winced at the volume blaring out of the phone. "*Erik? Is that you? Where are you?*"

"On the banks of the Styx, I am afraid. Or perhaps at Chinvat? It does not look too pleasant, I must say. I cannot seem to keep it all straight anymore..."

"You sound horrible. Are you...are you high?"

"Mm. I would very much like to be. Somewhat hard to come by out here, I am afraid."

"It's four in the morning here, Erik, and I'm too tired for games. Where are you? What are you doing?"

"Ah. That. Well, I am dying."

"Dying of what?"

Dying of love for her. Dying of thirst for her. Dying of need for her. Simply dying for her. What other answer could he want?

"Erik? Dying of what? Are you injured?"

He glanced down at his filthy, ripped, wet clothing and could see no blood. "Not that I am aware of."

"Are you sick, then?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, I do believe I am."

"Sick with what? Do you know?"

"Why would I call a doctor if I knew?" he snapped, irritated beyond measure at the question, though he was not entirely sure why. He was simply...tired. And hot. It was so hot. And his skin was so hot. His brain burned as well.

"Symptoms?"

"Tired."

A pause and then an impatient sigh. "That's it? Where are you? Maybe if you told me I could get a better idea what it might be."

He stared through the underbrush, sweating, his vision still fading in and out.

"Erik? Are you still there? Come to London. I can do some blood work. We'll see what it is."

"There is only one cure for me: to be no more; sad cure!"

"Stop this, please. Just...get to some sort of civilization. Come to London. I...There's something I want to talk to you about. It's important. I want to tell you..."

"No. It is enough, now. Farewell, happy fields...hail horrors, hail infernal world!"

"Erik, please, stop—"

He had stopped listening now and sat up, staring, unable to believe his eyes.

She was here.

In an instant, he threw the phone aside and forced himself to his feet, gasping, his head spinning, not enough air in his lungs. But she was *here*...He could see her. Standing there, not twenty feet from him, staring off into the distance, that little dreamy smile on her face, a lovely blush on her pale cheeks.

He stared, his heart pounding, his mouth dry. She was here, and she was beautiful.

Colors swirled around her, and yet she was clothed in the most glorious white he had ever seen. It seemed to fade into her skin, her white, delicate skin. She was a visiting angel, coming to declare good tidings.

His body was weighed down, yet he stumbled toward her, reaching for her. He spoke her name desperately. It was blasphemy on his lips, blasphemy to call an angel by her name, yet God had sent His purest creation to *him*, the lowliest, most unworthy of His children. A merciful God, indeed...No vision could be as pure, as virtuous, as magnificent as the one he was now witnessing.

For the second time, he tripped, one of his knees landing painfully on a sharp rock, and he could only crawl now, looking at her, at her golden hair that fell down around her shoulders, her nose, her wide blue eyes.

The colors around her intensified and then started to fade, and he began to panic, reaching out again. She continued to smile softly, as if she did not notice, and he felt his body convulse, choking him. Coughing, heaving, he pulled himself closer, but she did not come. And he could only beg wordlessly, desperately, but still she did not come.

And with a final murmur, the colors disappeared, and she was gone with them, and everything was black again.

Sickness enveloped him again, and he choked on it, though he had nothing left to expel. She was gone. *Gone*. She had never even been here in the first place. She was safe, thousands of miles away, happily married, away from him...

Another wave of nausea went through him, and he gasped on it, trying to breathe, and then suddenly wondered why he simply didn't allow himself to asphyxiate and simply die right there. There was nothing to stop him, nothing to go back to, nothing to look forward to. He didn't even have the exquisite torture of re-reading her old posts or watching her videos again, having smashed his laptop weeks ago as a punishment for still having them. He desperately wanted to know what she was doing...how she was faring...perhaps already expecting some horrible infant. The thought made his vision swim once more.

Yet it could not be done to continue watching her life from a screen. He wished to give her full freedom, and it would not happen if he continued to shadow her, even virtually. He had told her he was letting her go, and he was going to do it in every way he knew how, no matter how painful it was for him. That boy would take care of her now and ensure she wanted for nothing. *He* was to be nothing to her, not even a distant spectator.

Still. He breathed deeply, closing his eyes, trying to remember. He wanted to remember everything of that taunting, torturing hallucination. Every detail. But it

was already fading slightly. He swore, his voice hoarse and rasping, and brought a hand up to his ruined face. It was wet. Wonderful.

He had survived on memories for the past several months, though he knew that eventually he would have to give those up, too, no matter the cost. Another one came to him, one of the first lessons they had.

How did you find my videos in the first place?

I was searching for that rather obscure French love song. Yours was one of only two options I found.

Oh, yeah. That was one of Dad's favorites. What did you think?

That your French was atrocious and your guitar skills merely passable.

Oh. Wow...

But your voice was like nothing I have ever heard. I could not believe it, so I proceeded to watch all the other ones. It was profound. I instantly knew that I had to be the one to teach you. Anyone else would have spoiled your gift.

They were just...yeah. My way of coping, I think. I didn't actually think anyone would ever watch them or pay attention. It's crazy.

It is destiny. A voice such as yours cannot bear to live in the shadows. It will find a way. It will make itself known.

She had blushed, had protested, but he had meant every word he had said. Her voice simply could not be hidden away. Of course, without his tutelage she would never reach the heights of which he knew it was capable, but he was relatively certain that she preferred the banality of life with her boy rather than being locked away in a bedroom with only a masked freak for company.

Well. *That* he had learned in hindsight. Wasn't there some ridiculous saying about that?

Somehow—perhaps minutes or hours later—he made it back to the hole he was hiding in, his stomach gnawing at him impatiently. Without wasting a moment, he ripped the soiled clothing off of him, refusing to look at his disgusting body and feeling waves of relief as his sweaty, feverish skin was finally freed. As he so often did lately, he allowed his mind to wander, reveling in the hallucination, wishing for another.

She would be sitting there at the small table, a window thrown open to the warm evening, dressed in something elegant and airy, her hair soft and long. She would occasionally smile at him over the rim of her glass, that familiar blush hinting at her cheeks.

He would ask where she would like to go next. He would take her anywhere.

She would tell him that Paris had been lovely, but she had always wanted to see Munich.

He would suggest going to Vienna afterward, to which she would agree happily, and they would discuss which works she would perform there. She would listen for a while and then yawn delicately, and then he would suggest that they retire. After murmuring a consent, she would take his hand as he led the way to their large bed.

He stopped there. Always. Anything more would be impossible for him to imagine. It brought more pain than pleasure.

Words came to him, words that he had not been able to dismiss, no matter how much he told himself that it was not true, that he was deluding himself.

*Our state cannot be severed, we are one,
One flesh; to lose thee were to lose myself.*

Yet what else could be the explanation? He had never wanted to be drawn into her. He had never thought it possible. From an early age, he had known that *love* was not for him. Of course, he had started to become attracted to females as he grew and developed. He was a man in *some* aspects, after all. Yet love was not part of it. And Christine certainly did not fit what he had found enticing. He had always been especially captivated by dark-haired, sultry women. Naturally he had kept away, observing from a distance, unnerved that women could have such an innate power. He had seen men become slaves to their women and had scoffed from afar, for while the women were tempting, he had never experienced a break of resolve because of one of them.

And then *she* came and ruined everything.

She was everything he had not wanted. Her fair-blond hair, her blue eyes, her pale skin, her shy nature, her naivete...She was everything he had thought of as unattractive, as distasteful in a woman. And yet she had effortlessly, easily pulled him in. He hadn't been able to stop himself and had worshiped her from the start. All at once he had understood everything. Everything. He understood the wars over love, the operas for love, the great acts of heroism for love, the poets and the painters and the novelists. She had opened his eyes, and he had fallen at her feet, insane, devoted, and utterly finished.

Now it was over. His own forgotten opera was coming to an end.

There was only the finale left, and he could hear the cue, and he was ready.

***Chapter 18*: Chapter 18**

Eight Months Previously

The one positive aspect of this all that she could think of was at least it wasn't raining. The sidewalk was warm and dry but covered in small rocks and other bits of gravel or debris. For the first five minutes, she did not slow down, not even when she felt something pierce the bottom of her foot. She continued to run as fast as she could, not daring to look around her shoulder again.

Erik had simply stood there and watched her, not making any move to follow. However, she wasn't going to let that comfort her or trick her. At every block, every dark corner, every alleyway, she expected him to jump out, grab her, and shove her in the car before zooming off. And if he caught her...

She didn't want to think about what he would do.

The streets were becoming somewhat empty, and she could see restaurants and stores closing down as she ran by them. People gave her curious, confused glances, but no one tried to stop her, maybe presuming she was drunk or late or...something. She ran until she could barely breathe, until her feet hurt so badly that she had to hobble, and she did so, alternating between walking on her heels and then on her toes to give relief to different parts of her dirty feet. Finally, after several more minutes, she had to pause, and she doubled over, gasping, sweat and tears pouring down her face. She felt as if she might throw up, and she took several deep breaths, doing her best to hold down the bile.

When she finally felt somewhat able walk, she straightened up and looked around, the streets dark and unfamiliar. She had no idea where she had run, but she knew that standing alone on the street was the worst thing to do, and so she limped across the street to a bar that was still open, hoping that she would be safe if she was in a public place.

The door was heavy, and she almost felt too weak to push it open, but she managed and slipped inside hurriedly before it could shut on her. The bar was hot and full, but the noise level was comfortable at least, neither too loud nor too quiet. The bartender was busy helping someone at the other end, and Christine took a quick seat at an empty bar stool, hoping no one would notice her bare feet.

She looked down and saw that she had ripped several inches of the seam of her dress as she had run, and it was now exposing most of her left thigh. Blushing, she tried to pull it back together, but it was ripped beyond any repairs she could do at that moment.

Glancing back up, she jumped a little as she saw the bartender standing across from her and looking at her expectantly. She swallowed, hoping she still wasn't sweaty.

"What're you having, baby?" he said.

"Um." Scooting closer to the bar to hide her ripped dress, she said, "I...Do you have a phone I could borrow? I accidentally left mine in the taxi. In my purse. With my wallet."

She cringed inwardly at the way it sounded. The bartender's eyebrow rose suspiciously, but he left without a word and returned with a large telephone, obviously the bar's landline. She stared at it, suddenly feeling beyond idiotic.

"Oh." She had no idea what Raoul's number was. It was saved in her own cell phone, but she had never taken the time to actually memorize it.

"No one you can call?" the bartender said.

"I don't know anyone's number," she admitted weakly. "I'm so sorry...I'm so stupid."

The bartender gave her a small smile, maybe softening a little. "Hey, no one knows any phone numbers nowadays besides 911. I don't even know my girlfriend's phone number."

"Yeah," Christine said, beyond grateful that the bartender wasn't impatiently trying to kick her out because she had no money on her. "I want to call my fiancé to come pick me up, but I don't know how..." Tears filled her eyes suddenly, and she tried to hide them, but he had already seen.

The bartender furrowed his brows in concern and then glanced down at the rest of the bar before pulling out his own smart phone from his pocket.

"Here, baby," he said, typing in his passcode. "See if you can't find at least one number online to help you out. I've gotta go get some drinks for these people, but I'll be right back, okay?"

A few tears dripped from her eyes, and she wiped them away before taking the sleek phone gratefully.

"Thank you so much," she said, her voice cracking. "I can't believe...Thank you. You've saved my life." *Probably literally.*

"Just don't go looking at anything else in there," he said, joking but probably more than half-serious. "There are things in there a pretty girl like you shouldn't see."

She nodded, and he moved down the bar, refilling drinks and passing out a few bottles of beer. Most everybody was ignoring her, maybe presuming she was waiting for someone, and she was grateful as she began her search.

It took a few minutes, but at last she found a number publicly listed on one of Raoul's friend's accounts, someone she had never really spoken to. She awkwardly explained she had just lost her contacts in her phone and was trying to get a hold of Raoul as soon as possible. Obviously somewhat confused, the guy nevertheless gave it to her, and Christine made a mental note to remember the name and thank him personally as soon as everything settled. Maybe she would even insist that the friend be part of the wedding party.

With shaking fingers, she at last dialed Raoul's number, holding her breath. The phone rang out to voicemail, and she gave a frustrated sigh and redialed, doing her best to hold back her tears. When his voicemail picked up again, she released a shuddering, pitiful little cry and redialed once more, completely clueless of what to do if he didn't answer.

But then he did, which made her want to cry even further.

"Hello?" His voice was slightly irritated, obviously annoyed at the fact that the number had called three times in a row.

"Raoul...It's me." She brushed some tears off of her cheeks.

There was a pause. "*Christine?*"

"Yeah." She looked to see the bartender watching her, and she gave him a watery smile. He returned it with a thumbs-up and a broad smile of his own.

"*Where are you? What's...Is this your new number?*"

"No, I'm..." She took a shuddering breath. "Can I see you?"

"*What? Yeah, of course! When? I'm free tomorrow night if you want to go out.*"

"No. Tonight. Right now. Please, Raoul. It's...it's urgent."

There were a few seconds of confused silence, but he said, "*Sure, yeah. Tonight. Where do you want to meet?*"

"I'm not sure...It's so dangerous. I don't know..." She tried to think.

"*Dangerous? Are you okay? Where have you been for the past few weeks? I saw you last week after the symphony but you left without saying anything.*"

"I'll explain everything when I see you," she promised quickly. "First we have to go somewhere...Oh, I don't know! I don't know what to do. He could follow you. He might be following me..."

"*Who's following you? Where are you?*" Raoul's voice was becoming concerned, urgent.

"I'm alone. I'm...at a bar. Can you come get me? I don't have...I can't get anywhere from here."

"*I'm grabbing my keys right now. I'll be over there as soon as I can. Tell me what bar it is and the address.*"

Christine looked around and leaned over to ask the bartender the required information. She relayed it to Raoul, who said,

"*I think I know where that is. I should be about fifteen minutes away. Are you okay until I get there?*"

"I'll be fine." Would she? "I just...Hurry. Please. And be so careful."

"*I will. I love you.*"

More tears slid down her cheeks, and she could have burst into sobs. Instead she gulped them back and whispered, "I love you, too," before hanging up.

The bartender gave her some water and pushed a small bowl of cashews over to her after she had handed his phone back with a slew of 'thank yous.'

"Glad I could help," he said somewhat gruffly. "Looks like you've had a rough night."

"It...hasn't been good," she agreed, choking up a little. "Do you mind if I wait here until my fiance comes?"

"You can stay here all night if you want, baby," he said.

Christine sat there, clutching her glass of water, glad that she was being mostly ignored by the other bar-goers. She ate a few cashews but had to set them aside when her nausea returned. It was only after sitting there silently for a solid five minutes that she noticed how badly she was trembling. Her hands were twitching against the glass of water, her legs shaking.

She scanned the road, her heart jumping when a car drove by but falling when it didn't stop. If Erik was following Raoul...if he somehow knew Raoul's car...it was all for nothing. Christine nearly choked at the thought that Erik might attack Raoul before he reached her. Had she stupidly sent her boyfriend straight to his death?

Still, she couldn't stop her heart from fluttering as she remembered his words. Over two weeks of absolutely no contact...and he still ended the phone call with *I love you*. Without knowing what was happening, what she was going to say to him when they saw each other again, what it was even about, he still loved her. And she loved him, too.

Finally, just as she was beginning to fear that something bad really *had* happened, a sleek red car pulled up to the sidewalk, and Christine gave a strangled cry of relief, not caring that most people in the bar turned to look at her curiously. She jumped up from her seat and ran to the door just to see Raoul stepping out, looking at the bar in slight confusion, obviously unsure if it was the right place.

Bursting through the door, she half-screamed his name. "*Raoul!*"

And he saw her and ran to her, grabbing her and crushing her to him. Crying, laughing, and nearly hysterical with fear, relief, and exhaustion, she let herself fall into his arms and gripped onto him tightly, bunching up his shirt in her hands, actually jumping up and hitching her legs around his waist, wanting to sink into him, to be carried away by him and his warmth and strength.

If he was confused or startled by her, he said nothing and simply let her latch onto him, holding her without question and rubbing his hand up and down her back. She sobbed into his neck for several long moments, the emotions of the night fully catching up with her. The slight release of tension made her head clear just a little, and she wiped her wet face before pulling back to look at him.

He looked at her, grinning but obviously bewildered. "I guess you missed me?" he said.

She kissed him then, maybe a little too desperately, but if he only knew what she had just run from, he would have kissed her back just as fiercely.

After that, she slowly let go of his shirt and unwound her legs, knowing she should have been embarrassed by her unrestrained reaction but not embarrassed in the slightest. Raoul let her down and then made a disapproving noise when she finally stood in front of him.

"Where are your shoes?" he said. "And your dress is ripped!"

"We need to go," she said in reply. "I'll...We just have to get out of here."

His brow furrowed, but he nodded. "We'll do whatever you want."

She was about to duck into the car, but she paused and then said hesitantly, "Raoul? Do you have...um, some money? The bartender in there was really, really nice to me. He let me use his phone to find your number and call you."

"I was wondering whose number that was," Raoul said, pulling out his wallet. He looked into it. "I have thirty dollars in cash. Is that enough?"

"That's...fine. Perfect. Thank you so much. I promise I'll pay you back."

He looked at her then, actually laughing a little. "Christine, you don't have to worry about...Whatever. Here's the cash."

She took it and went back into the bar, wanting to reach over and hug the bartender as he approached.

"Got everything sorted out?" he said, looking out of the front windows to see Raoul waiting.

Christine nodded. "Yes. Thank you so much for helping me. You don't know what you've done...You've helped me so much." Feeling a little awkward, she held out the cash. "I know it's not a lot, but..."

The bartender shook his head. "I don't want to be paid for being nice. Don't worry about it, baby."

"It's paying for the water and cashews, then," she said insistently. "And a tip for the service."

Sighing a little, the bartender took it, frowning. "You don't have to, you know."

"I do. Thank you." And with that, she went back out of the door and ran to the car.

After settling in and pulling the seat belt across her lap, she felt herself hold her breath as Raoul shifted into gear and took off. She didn't know what to expect. The car exploding, maybe...A black SUV to come barreling out of nowhere and chase them...

But nothing happened. Raoul drove down the street and turned right. And that was it.

She reached over and put a hand on his leg, gripping his jeans, still a little unbelieving that he was sitting next to her. Just an hour ago she had honestly believed she would never escape. And now she was here, escaping.

Or trying to, at least.

"So," Raoul said after a few silent minutes. "What's up?"

She knew he was just trying to make a joke, and she *knew* that he was completely unaware of what she had just run from, but the fact that he was being so light-hearted about it all concerned her immensely. Didn't he know what they were dealing with? *No, Christine, he doesn't know. He doesn't know anything.*

"We have to find somewhere to hide," she said. "Not your apartment...not mine, obviously. A park? No...it's too open. But everything is closing, now. What should we do?"

"A hotel?" Raoul suggested, and she was grateful he didn't question her and was just trying to help at the moment.

"Yeah!" She sat up. "Why didn't I think of that? Oh..." A pause. "Do you have more cash on you?"

He shook his head. "I gave it all to you. I have some more at my apartment, though. We could swing by and grab it."

"No! No, he's probably watching your apartment by now." *If he wasn't already following them.* "And we can't use your card anywhere."

"Why not?" One of the first of a long series of questions she knew he was impatient to ask.

"They're too easy to trace," she said. "He'll be able to find us that way."

"Okay. So *who*? Who is 'he'?"

Christine bit her lip, blushing a little. "Remember my voice teacher?"

"The crazy one?" Raoul paused. "Oh, no. Is he actually crazy?"

And with that, Christine burst into another wave of fresh tears.

Raoul swerved to the side of the road and parked—illegally—before turning off the car and looking at her in concern. "Christine? What happened? Did he do something to you?"

She wanted to crawl into his lap and have him hold her again, but the car made it impossible, and so she had to content herself with burying her face in his right arm.

"I thought I was going to be there forever!" she sobbed. "I thought—I thought I'd never see you again!"

"Hey, I thought I'd never see you again, either," Raoul said quietly, brushing her tangled hair away from her face. "But I'm here now. It's okay. We're together."

But for how long? She shook her head and cried for several more minutes before managing to calm herself down, and she hiccupped and pressed her cheek against his shoulder, letting her eyes close as he continued to stroke her hair and run his fingers across her wet cheeks and neck. She was exhausted. And thirsty. And afraid.

As she sighed against his skin, she heard him say, "I have a friend who's gone for the weekend. His roommate is still there, but maybe he would let us stay there just for the night. Would that be okay?"

Tiredly, she nodded, and she had to pull away to let him reach for his phone and make a few calls. She felt bad as she heard him continuously apologize for calling so late, but he was locked out of his apartment, and he couldn't find any locksmith businesses that were open, and he was just wondering if he could crash on the extra bed, and...

After confirming with his friend, he finally put the phone down and gave her a half-smile. "Are you going to be all right spending the night in a twin bed with me?"

At that moment, nothing sounded more appealing. Being as close to him as possible meant that there was no way he could disappear or be taken without her knowing and seeing.

Twenty minutes later, they were being let into an apartment by a grumpy-looking guy about their age, obviously having been woken by Raoul's phone call.

"Thanks again," Raoul said, quickly pulling her into the apartment behind him. "We didn't have anywhere else to go."

"A hotel?" the guy said shortly. "*Her* apartment, maybe?" He scowled at Christine. "You didn't say you were bringing your girlfriend."

"Sorry I forgot to mention it," Raoul said, obviously not wanting to argue or prolong the conversation. "Those are good ideas for next time. It's the bedroom in the corner, right?"

"Yeah," the guy replied, heading back to his own bedroom. "Don't do anything until I'm asleep. And be quiet about it. I better not be woken up in twenty minutes by the bed banging against the wall."

Christine blushed brightly, but neither she nor Raoul replied and instead went to the bedroom.

It was obviously the room of a single, college-aged male. The bed was unmade, clothes were on the floor, and there were several banners and logos from Columbia taped crookedly to the wall. Christine tried to ignore the large pile of dirty laundry in the corner as well as the poster of a busty woman in a tiny bikini bending over a motorcycle. Raoul rolled his eyes at it all and pulled the sheets and red bedspread up.

"We probably don't want to sleep in the sheets," he said.

She choked out a laugh. "Yeah. Good idea." Feeling a little awkward, she sat down on the bed, suddenly aware again that her dress was ripped and that her whole leg was showing. She blushed again and tried to cover it.

Raoul went over to the closet and rummaged around for a minute before returning with a musty blanket, holding it out to her. "Here." Then he set it to the side hurriedly, kneeling down and frowning. "Your foot is bleeding."

Christine blinked in surprise and suddenly remembered that she had stepped on something as she had run. She hadn't given it a thought since then, caught up in so many other emotions and worries. Raoul took her dirty foot and passed a few fingers over the bottom of it, and she blushed but gave a little yelp of pain as well as his fingers grazed the cut.

"I'm sure there's something in the bathroom I can use to clean this up," he said, standing. "I'll be right back."

She wanted to tell him not to go, not to leave her sight, but instead she nodded and grabbed the blanket, wrapping it around herself for modesty as well as for warmth. She could hear Raoul rummaging around, obviously trying to be as quiet as possible, and she leaned back against the wall, closing her eyes in exhaustion until she heard the door open. She sat up quickly, immediately tense, until she saw it was only Raoul returning.

Kneeling in front of her, he put down his hastily-assembled first aid kit and carefully began to clean up her feet.

"I'm so sorry," she murmured. "You shouldn't have to...It's disgusting. I'm sorry."

"The last thing you want is for this to get infected," Raoul said. "It doesn't look like you stepped on any glass or anything, but maybe you should go see a doctor, just in case."

She would argue against that later, when he understood more.

"Where are your shoes, anyway?" he then said, looking up at her, and in that question was the real one she knew he wanted answers to: *What happened?*

She took a deep breath and pushed some loose curls behind her ears.

"When I told you I was training here for the summer, I didn't really tell you everything..." Glancing at him nervously, she then told him everything she could; Erik's offer to train her after seeing her videos, coming to New York, the concert, Erik's growing suspicion and jealousy, being locked in, taking off his mask...

"I thought I was going to be there forever," she said again. During the course of the story, Raoul had finished bandaging her foot and had moved to sit beside her. Now she was curled up in his lap, pressing her nose into his neck, comforted by his steady pulse. She continued: "But...as soon as he was distracted, just for a second, I thought...I felt that it was my only chance. It would be the only time I was given, and so I took off my shoes and ran."

"Wow." Raoul had remained mostly silent throughout her story and had wordlessly let her climb onto his lap. Now he wrapped his arms around her, and she blushed when his hand came to rest on her bare left leg, but he appeared not to notice. After a moment, he said firmly, "We need to call the police. They can help us."

"No!" She sat up quickly to look at him. "No police. Please."

"Christine, that psycho locked you up for nearly three weeks. That's illegal. And you're afraid that he's going to come back and find you again. We need the police to help us."

"No, they'll put him in jail!" she said.

Raoul's brow furrowed deeply. "And you don't want that?" he said.

"I..." She sighed and wrapped her arms around him, knowing that no matter what she said, he wouldn't understand. "Erik is just confused. He's not...a bad guy. He just doesn't know."

"The only people who think it's okay to lock girls up are criminals and people with mental problems," Raoul said. "If he...has *problems* like that, then the police would be able to get him the help he needs. He can't just walk away from the stuff he did to you."

"I know—you're right. But I can't...Just leaving him like this is punishment enough. Can't we please just—just no police. Please." She could tell he was about to argue, and so she added, "If it gets too dangerous, I'll call the police. Okay? I promise. Just not yet. I can sort it out. I can. I don't want anything bad to happen to any of us."

There was a pause, and Raoul sighed, sounding annoyed. "Fine. No police yet. I still think we should, but if you don't think we need to, then fine. But what do we do now?"

A few moments of silence followed, and Christine closed her eyes. "Maybe we should just sleep," she murmured. "And tomorrow we can figure it out."

He nodded, and they spent a minute trying to situate themselves on the narrow bed. Christine blushed a little as she curled up next to him—mostly on top of him, as the bed was too small for both of them to lay comfortably side by side.

"I can sleep on the floor," Raoul offered as she wiggled about, both of them figuring out where to put their legs. She wrapped one of hers around his and shook her head.

"I want you here," she said, putting a hand on his chest.

"We'll see how you feel in two hours," he said, smiling, and she leaned up and kissed him warmly, still beyond amazed that she was actually *here* with him and not still in Erik's apartment, trapped and desperate.

She had a feeling they were both too exhausted and confused to feel the need to do anything other than curl up together and sleep. He was warm, and that combined with the blanket wrapped her into a warm fog of dozing dreams, waking occasionally when Raoul moved or when she began to feel uncomfortable.

She thought about Erik throughout the night. What was he doing? Why hadn't he chased after her? Caught her? Was it all part of some elaborate game he was playing with her? He had to know she would try to escape at the first chance...So why actually let her? What was he planning?

She snuggled even closer to Raoul. If Erik even tried to do anything to him, she would...she would...

Christine buried her face into his chest. Really, what was she supposed to do if Erik actually hurt Raoul? It was her fault, after all, for dragging him into it all. She could have called the police in the bar and asked them to help her, just like Raoul had said. She could have gone into some sort of protection program...or something. Instead she had called Raoul and had begged him to help her, knowingly putting his safety at risk. Was she really so selfish?

There was no doubt that Erik knew she would go to Raoul first. What if he had been somehow watching Raoul the whole time, waiting for her to run to him? What if he was...watching them right now? Christine squeaked at the thought and pulled the blanket up to her chin, looking around the dark room as if some camera would be blinking at her.

However, the night continued with no sudden appearances of glowing eyes or black masks, and so she eventually relaxed, still somehow glad for the twin bed and the fact that she got to be as close to Raoul as she could, even if it was just a bit uncomfortable. She hadn't seen him for nearly three weeks, and she did love him...Giving a brief, exhausted smile into his chest, she at last fell completely asleep.

Chapter 19: Chapter 19

She was having a hard time staying on beat, as the clapping around her was sporadic and not synchronized. Frowning just a bit, she bowed her head and tried to concentrate, doing her best to block out the clapping and the singing. She had learned a trickier version of this song, having grown sick of the older one, and she was doing her best to remember the chord progression and the strumming pattern. Still, she supposed that no one would really notice if she missed a chord here or there.

When she was finally done, there was a smattering of applause and some laughter, and she looked up and smiled a little.

"Again!" a few voices said insistently, and so she nodded and started the song up once more, doing better the second time around. Then they insisted on singing it again. And *again*. Luckily, when they tried to get her to play it a fifth time, a nurse stepped in, saying,

"Now, kids, Miss Christine's time is up for today. But she'll be back next Thursday, right? So we have to be patient and wait for her until then."

Christine felt a little bad being grateful toward the nurse. After all, she was playing in a pediatric oncology ward, and she was doing it for the kids, but playing the same repetitive children's song five times in a row was a bit of a stretch for her, even if she was still trying to perfect playing it.

The children groaned dramatically but ultimately agreed, and some chattered amongst themselves as Christine put her guitar away. She latched the case and glanced up to see a little girl sitting in a large chair, watching silently. For some reason, she was Christine's favorite, even though the little girl never spoke or sang along when Christine was there.

"Can I see you on Thursday, Sophie?" Christine asked quietly, smiling.

The girl stared at her and then nodded.

After saying goodbye to the five or six other children who were there, Christine was escorted back to the front desk by the nurse, the hospital full of unpleasant smells and noises. It always reminded her of her father's last days, something she never liked to think about.

"You're an angel, Christine," the nurse said. "Those kids love it when you come."

"Heh," Christine said, switching her guitar case to a different hand. "They're all really great kids."

The nurse nodded. "Poor little babies. It's people like you who make the difference here. And you have such a pretty voice! I don't know if anyone's ever told you that before."

Christine smiled noncommittally as she signed out on the volunteer sheet on the desk. "Thanks. I'm just happy to help. See you Thursday."

The nurse waved, and Christine walked out into the spring afternoon, seeing the bus coming around the corner. She jogged to the nearby bus stop in order to catch it, careful with her guitar, and looked out of the window as she rode. Luckily the ride wasn't long. She could have afforded a car, but it seemed like so much trouble and work to actually get one. Licensing, insurance, registration...No, public transit worked just fine right now. There weren't that many places she needed to go, anyway.

She struggled for a moment with her bag and guitar as she unlocked the door to her apartment. It was just as she left it, a mug still in the sink, a blanket on the couch, and a pair of her shoes lying by the small table.

A little meow came from around the corner, and she smiled and said, "Did you miss me, kitty?" as a gray cat trotted up to her. Putting her things down and shutting the door, she bent down to scratch the cat behind the ears for a moment. To the cat's apparent disgruntlement, judging by its annoyed meow, she then stood and went to the kitchen, pulling back the small curtain to open the window and staring out of it again for just a moment. The cat meowed again, and Christine looked down.

"You want something to eat, kitty? Me too."

After setting down a bowl of cat food, Christine pulled out a banana for herself and sat at the table, looking back toward the window. She could see spring outside, and it confused her for some reason.

It had been nearly two months since her trip to Paris. She was grateful she hadn't heard anything from Madeleine, as she would be more than happy to never see or hear from that woman again. However, she had spent several sleepless nights trying to simply process everything she had heard. When she felt she had at last somewhat understood it, the first thought that had come to her head was *Poor Erik*.

Poor Erik. A little boy locked in a basement, dead to the rest of the world, hated by his own mother and then kicked out when he was just starting to grow. Christine had no idea where he had gone after that, as she doubted he would have been invited to Iran right after. Madeleine wouldn't have known, and Dr. Khan hadn't known, either. Still, Christine had discovered far more than she had expected to during her trips, and she had written down everything in her notebook, writing up a rough sketch and timeline of his life, any details she could remember, anything that she thought might help.

But it had been two months now, and she still felt...unresolved. It frustrated her to no end. She had shed tears over this fact. Would she never be satisfied? Would this haunt her for the rest of her life? Why couldn't she just get over it? Was she intentionally clinging to this? Would she let it define her forever?

In an attempt at normalcy and to give her a chance to start her life back up, she had taken a part-time job as a receptionist at an insurance agency. It wasn't exciting, but it was something, and it pushed her every day to take another step toward a normal life. She was planning to enroll in classes in the fall and begin her schooling again, no matter how hard it was.

Then she had decided to volunteer at the nearby hospital, determining that a normal life for her had to involve at least *some* music. It had been painful the first few weeks, but eventually she had numbed herself enough, and she did really like the children she got to play for.

The cat had come on a whim. Christine had felt particularly lonely one afternoon and had spent several minutes sitting on her bed and crying quietly before standing and deciding to do something about it. She went to the local shelter and picked out the cat, taking it home and then realizing she had nothing for it. No food, no box, no toys. So she had taken it with her to a pet store and had gotten everything a cat could ever want. Christine still hadn't named it. She couldn't decide on a name. The cat didn't really seem to mind, and it was good for keeping her company during those nights when memories and feelings threatened to

overwhelm her. Several times she imagined how *he* would have reacted to it...

She wanted a cat, and he was only too happy to give her whatever she wished, but perhaps she wished to reconsider. An animal was responsibility, filth, and fur. Perhaps she wished for a new dress, instead.

Maybe he just didn't like animals because he had never had one as a boy.

No, that was one thing his mother had actually had some sense about.

Well, she had gotten this cat, and it was staying because he hadn't stayed. No one stayed, but the cat would, at least.

She looked back over at it. It had finished eating and was busily licking its paws, purring contentedly. Finished with her own meal, Christine sat for several minutes, still looking out of the window. The trees were turning green, and the weather had been nice the past few days. She wondered if the cat would appreciate going outside one afternoon.

Paradise Lost was sitting on the table, and she flipped it open. She still looked through it, rereading some old passages that Erik had marked and finding some of her own. One stanza had been on her mind all week, and she read it again.

*So heavenly love shall outdo hellish hate,
Giving to death, and dying to redeem,
So dearly to redeem what hellish hate
So easily destroy'd, and still destroys,
In those who, when they may, accept not grace.*

She wasn't sure what exactly to do about it. Erik hadn't loved her with a "heavenly love." It felt like he had loved her more with a "hellish hate," having been jealous, manipulative, angry, and controlling.

No. She shook her head. It was true that he had been those things, yet those had come after Raoul. Before...he had been happy to give her anything, let her do anything. It had probably all come from a deep-rooted fear; a fear that he would lose her to Raoul (which he had...for a while). A fear that she would hate him as soon as she saw his face. And that fear had translated into a horrible temper that he had allowed to overpower him and destroy any chance they might have had. Or maybe he was simply angry deep inside. Angry with his life and what God had given him.

She rubbed her eyes. How was she supposed to know? She wasn't a psychologist. And it wasn't as if Erik had ever talked about these kinds of things with her. It looked like the both of them had simply closed up, and she had remained that way, no matter how hard Raoul had tried to pry her open. And as for Erik...well, who knew what he was doing.

After another minute, she stood and went to the bed, grabbing her laptop and opening it. She had been chatting with Meg recently, though she had simply said that school was fine and that she was doing well in her classes. She felt bad for lying, but if she told Meg she had dropped out last semester, it would lead to a slew of other questions that she didn't want to answer just yet, because she didn't have the answers herself.

There was no new message from Meg, and so she browsed her social media accounts for a while, trying not to look up Raoul's but failing. There wasn't anything recent. He had been with his aunt and uncle for Christmas and then with friends for New Years. Easter had come and gone without anything. There wasn't much pain there, anymore. She regretted how Raoul had found out everything and that she hadn't explained anything to him, but ultimately she understood that it was right that they were not together, so she hadn't tried to contact him in any way. She couldn't have given him what he needed, and it wouldn't have been fair to him if she had stayed.

Opening her email, she was surprised when an unread message was there.

"It's from Dr. Khan, kitty," she said out loud, looking over to the cat. It was lounging near the open window and didn't look as excited about the email as Christine was.

Dr. Khan hadn't emailed her in two months, and so Christine eagerly opened the new one, her heart pounding in her throat.

Christine,

I hope you're doing well. London is still cold, but that's to be expected. Should you ever return for a visit, do try to come during the summer. The parks can be very beautiful.

I'll get right to it, then. During Rahim's annual spring cleaning, he came across a box in the loft that I had forgotten about. Had I remembered it when you were here, I would have gladly given it to you. It was what he had left behind after leaving Iran, and I thought you might be interested. Rahim has scanned everything he could that was in the box and it's all in the attachment. He had obviously left behind some personal effects, clothing, shoes, etc, but I didn't keep them.

How is your research going? I hope you are finding the answers you're looking for. You deserve them. Please contact me right away for any assistance you may require.

Sincere regards,

Nadir

Swallowing, Christine opened the attachment, scrolling through several pages. There were a couple books as well, with only the title pages scanned to let her know which ones he had had. She didn't recognize any of them, as some were in Farsi and others in a couple other languages she didn't know. A few English titles told her that they were old obsolete technical books about programming, software, and development, and just reading the titles made her confused.

There were a few pages of what appeared to be notes. On closer inspection, she realized that they were official-looking receipts. Just as she was about to read through them, the cat jumped up and walked over her laptop. She gently but hurriedly pushed it aside.

"Not now," she said impatiently. "This is important."

They were all somewhat similar, and so she read through the first one.

Dear E,

We hope you are happy with your purchase of product B202AX0428. We guarantee quality and precision and will continue to do so. Thank you for your continued patronage.

If you have any concerns or questions regarding your purchase or our service, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Savino de Rege
Director and CEO

There were two more with nearly the exact same wording. The only thing that changed was the product number. An online search of the numbers revealed no images or links, leaving her clueless as to what Erik had actually purchased. A search of Savino de Rege, however, gave her a variety of options, and she read through several articles.

Savino de Rege, born in Rome, Italy, was the director and CEO of the Italian-based multi-faceted company Inoltrare, Inc. After the company's bankruptcy and dissolution six years ago, de Rege left Italy. He now lives in London.

Christine clicked on a link that explained more details about the company's bankruptcy. It stated that a deal had gone awry and that the company had been exposed of bribery, fraud, and money laundering. Several people had gone to jail. Savino de Rege had been cleared of any charges and had left the country afterward. Christine looked over the information, frowning. Had Savino actually been involved somehow? Had Erik somehow helped him get away? He had already killed people...White collar crime was probably child's play to him.

There was a business journal interview with Savino de Rege listed online, given two years ago, and Christine read over it, though mostly it was Savino talking about his personal experience dealing with the failure of such a large, multi-million dollar company. According to the article, Savino had inherited the business from his father.

What happened to Inoltrare was unfortunate, yes, but it is good that it was exposed before it became bigger. I had no idea what was happening and would have turned the company in myself had I known. I had to leave Italy to escape the stigmatism that followed me everywhere. I hope this is not to be my legacy. I feel that I still have much to do. I will not let this failure of others define me or my work. I think my father would be proud of the way I handled the failure.

There was a picture included the article. Savino de Rege was olive-skinned, with dark curly hair and an intense gaze. Christine looked back to a few of the first articles. He lived in London, and she nearly groaned. Would she have to go back there? Of course she couldn't have discovered this while she was *already* in London those few months ago...

The cat meowed next to her, and she jumped slightly and turned to look at it.

"I shouldn't complain, kitty," she said, sighing. "Wasn't I complaining a year ago about how I'd never be able to travel anywhere? And now I have a chance to go back to London. Maybe this time I can leave the city...go to Scotland or something..." She sat there for a while, and the cat curled up beside her.

"Still..." There was contact information for Savino. Maybe she wouldn't have to go to London for it all. Maybe she would just be able to talk to him over the phone or over email. After all, the last two times she had tried to talk about Erik with someone face-to-face, she had had a gun pulled on her and had been slapped across the face. She wasn't particularly eager to have anything like that happen again. Doing it all within the confines of her own apartment was a lot less exciting, but it was much safer. And maybe this summer she still could travel again, just for fun. Somewhere warm and relaxing...and alone.

It hurt to be alone all the time. Christine set aside the laptop and picked up the cat, suddenly overcome. She buried her face in its soft fur and tried to hold back tears. These moments came and went, but they came and went frequently. From her mother to her father to Meg to Erik and to Raoul...and she was alone. With only a cat.

She laughed suddenly, probably sounding crazy because she was crying at the same time. And that made her laugh harder. Here she was. Already a crazy cat lady at twenty-one years old. The laughter died, and she sobbed for a few more minutes before gulping down the tears. It was her own fault, really...She could go out at this moment and tried to make friends. But it felt impossible right now. She was on friendly terms with her coworkers and the nurses and children at the hospital, but she was lacking deep connections, real conversations...And she needed them. She wanted to talk to someone about what she had discovered, what she thought, what she hoped. There was no one. Except the cat.

"Too bad you can't talk back," she murmured, still holding it close. It had given up trying to squirm out of her arms and was instead sitting there unhappily as she cuddled it and cried on it.

She had felt so lonely that she had even written another letter to Erik last month, and it sat on her nightstand, unfinished.

Dear Erik,

I haven't seen you in about eight months now. It's gone by so fast, but it's also gone by so slowly. I have my own small apartment now, thanks to the money you gave me. It was too much, but it's really helped me do the things I needed to do.

I talked with Dr. Khan, you know. I think he was a really good friend to you. I hope he was, anyway. I hope you had friends in your life, because I talked to your mother (yes, I talked to your mother), and besides being a terrible person, she made it sound like you never had friends or never really got to even have a childhood. I hope that's not true.

Actually, I hope a lot of things aren't true. I hope it's not true that you did bad things like kill people. I hope you didn't start or become involved in civil wars. I hope you weren't kicked out of your own home when you were still so young. I hope your parents actually loved you and didn't fake your death when you were just born (even though they did; I went and saw the grave. They had put Charles Henri Jean St. Sauveur on the tombstone. Did you know that? It's not even your real name. I hope it's not disrespectful to admit, but that name sounds really pretentious to me. I like just Erik a lot better, even though I have no idea where that name even came from).

I can't write too much about music now. I'm volunteering at a hospital soon. My first day is next Tuesday. I know you'll roll your eyes. Maybe even be angry because you'd say I'm wasting my talent on a bunch of children. I don't think it's a waste. It's obviously not what we had envisioned. It's not an opera house or sold-out theater. But I hope it helps someone at least.

Is it weird that I actually miss you? I don't miss a lot of you. I don't miss your temper or the fact that you almost killed someone in front of me, and I definitely don't miss your locking me up for weeks. I miss you and the music and your weird jokes. I don't know if I can see you again, no matter how much I actually want

to sometimes. I don't think you should see me, either. It'd be too much for both of us.

And that was it. She hadn't decided how she wanted to end it, and so she hadn't ended it. The last paragraph had drained her entirely. Actually admitting it to herself in writing had been startling. But it was true. She did miss him. Even after deliberately forcing herself to sit down and remember all the horrible things that had happened, she still missed him.

The letter had helped a little, but not as much as she had hoped. What was she supposed to do now? Talk to Savino de Rege and learn more about Erik? And then what? Put it in her notebook, tuck the notebook away...Suddenly be fine with everything...?

She knew that that wouldn't happen. Knowing answers to a lot of her questions hadn't really helped her. Some had even confused her more. During a very bad moment, she had set up her laptop and had sat there, intent on writing a blog post and publishing it for *him* to see. She wanted to demand answers from him, and that was the only way she knew how to contact him. Then common sense had come back, and she had shut the laptop and left the apartment, taking a walk that had lasted almost two hours. Unfortunately it hadn't cleared her head.

At last, she released her hold on the cat, and it darted away to the corner where it gazed at her reproachfully. She wiped away a few lingering tears and sighed, pulling the laptop back to her and reading over the receipts several more times, her fingers drumming against the side of the computer.

"What do you think, kitty?" she mused out loud. "Should we try?"

What if Savino didn't actually know who Erik was? The receipts had just said *E*. Maybe Erik had never given them his name. But if that were the case, Savino would either just ignore her message or maybe reply saying he didn't know anything. But what should she say? She had been a fake patient and a fake design student the last two times. What would she be this time?

Putting her chin in her hands, she blew a curl out of her face and squinted at the screen. The last two fake identities had gotten her into a bit of trouble. Maybe this time...Maybe she should just be honest. Maybe she should just be herself. Obviously she wouldn't tell Savino everything, just the bare minimum. That way she wouldn't be digging herself into any kind of hole.

She spent the rest of the evening writing the email, doing her best to keep it friendly but not too informal. After grabbing herself another banana, she finished it and then read it out loud to the cat.

Dear Mr. de Rege,

Hi there! My name is Christine Daae. I'm a university student in the United States.

I know this might seem odd, but I think that we have a common connection. Last summer, I was able to get to know a masked man named Erik. He and I spent a lot of time together, but we've since lost contact. He left behind some of his things, and I found your name in some of his old records.

I hope this isn't too forward or inappropriate of me. I'm just really curious about how you two know each other and if you're still in contact with him. I'm looking to get into contact with him again, too, which is another reason I'm writing to you. I'd be really grateful for any information you have. My cell number is listed below if you'd rather talk about this over the phone.

PS If you have no idea who I'm talking about, feel free to disregard this message and accept my apologies!

Christine frowned a little. It didn't sound as good out loud as it had in her head as she was writing it, but it would do. The worst that could happen would be for Savino to ignore her. Or call and tell her about more people Erik had killed.

Her fingers hesitated for a few moments, and then she clicked *Send*. It was out of her hands, now. She shut the laptop and set it aside before stretching and yawning. There was work tomorrow. Maybe she would try to call Meg afterward with how lonely she had been feeling lately. Talking was always more awkward, though, as she didn't have the time to think of how to phrase her answers like she had with messaging. Still, it would be nice to hear her friend's voice. Maybe she could even manage a trip out to Los Angeles in the upcoming months. That would be exciting, wouldn't it?

She pulled the blankets out from underneath her and lay down with another sigh, tired from the day and her short outburst. There was a soft rustle as the cat jumped up onto the bed and settled in near her legs, curling up and beginning to purr again.

"Erik would hate you," she murmured sleepily. "It's a good thing he's not here."

But was it a good thing? She thought it was. And yet she didn't. She didn't know.

After months, she still simply didn't know.

***Chapter 20*: Chapter 20**

Ten Months Previously

He was calm. There seemed to be no rush, no reason for panic. So predictable was it all, so planned out, that he felt he had somehow done it all before, had practiced these motions so frequently that he could have done them with his eyes closed.

With methodical precision, he prepared the house and himself, unconcerned of the clock ticking away the minutes. It would all come to an end, and it would go exactly how he knew it would. He did not sleep for a moment that night, yet it felt as if he had never been more rested and alert in his entire life.

What hath night to do with sleep?

The game felt too easy at this point. He had been slightly disappointed by the lack of challenge, but he had not been the one to choose these rules. She had chosen everything, and this was how she wished to play. As always, he was more than willing to do whatever she wished, and so he would abide by her rules and terms. He wanted to give her everything, and so he would give her this as well. He was her slave.

He was infinitely patient with his preparations, hurrying nothing, overlooking nothing. The updates were timely and unsurprising. The boy had been seen leaving his apartment late that evening, had met her and had taken her to an apartment that took a relatively short amount of time to identify as a friend of that boy's. Undoubtedly she believed it would be more difficult to trace them if they went to a place she thought he would not know.

He mused as he worked throughout the night. Perhaps he should have attempted to teach Christine chess during their time together. At least then she would have understood how well he could anticipate her steps, her decisions. She believed she could out-manuever him. She was mistaken.

After ensuring that nothing had been forgotten, he left, knowing when he returned, it would be with his future bride.

Waking with Raoul still next to her gave her a burst of hope and happiness that made her smile as she snuggled even closer to him. He was waking up as well and grunted a little when she pressed a sleepy kiss to the space above his heart and slipped her hand under his wrinkled shirt to feel his warm skin.

"You're still here," she murmured.

"Where else would I be?" he said, his own voice heavy with sleep.

She paused, not wanting to answer that question. Instead she yawned and forced her eyes open. The room looked untouched, undisturbed, and with the summer sun pouring in through the bedroom window, she felt as if it was a good sign. This was actually going to work. They were actually going to be free.

A soft, rumbling snore came from beside her, and she looked to see that Raoul was starting to fall asleep again. Laughing in spite of herself, she lightly tapped his cheek, saying, "Hey, wake up! You can't go back to sleep right now."

He gave an annoyed groan. "Five more minutes."

She reached over him for the phone he had set on the nightstand, clicking a button so the screen was illuminated, and she frowned as she squinted at it, sitting up quickly. "It's almost ten, Raoul. We should have left hours ago."

"Well, obviously your crazy teacher doesn't know we're here, or else he'd be here already. So we're safe. And we can sleep a little longer." He opened his eyes briefly to give her a crooked, tired smile.

"I guess we should decide what to do," she said as a way of choosing to ignore his comment, rubbing her eyes. "All of my stuff is back at the apartment. I don't have any money or ID..." She tried to think, but Raoul put a warm hand on her back, and she glanced down at him, unable to help but smile widely. He looked so incredibly handsome and inviting. After nearly three weeks apart, she wanted nothing more than to simply be with him and not have to worry about anything else. She wanted to tell him everything that had happened to her and have him understand, but she knew he wouldn't. She didn't even understand it herself. So she merely lay back down, resting her cheek on his shoulder, enjoying the feel of his strong arm around her, keeping her close. She could feel something in the back of her mind nagging at her, telling her to get up and treat this situation with the graveness it warranted. But it felt too nice there, with his solid body beside hers and his breath ruffling her curls. How many nights during her imprisonment had she imagined this exact scenario? Curled up with him in the morning sunlight, simply content to lie there together...

Raoul's breathing evened again, and she closed her eyes and was just beginning to drift when several loud thumps came from the door. Immediately, she sat up again, heart racing, trembling. She could envision Erik bursting through the door to grab her, and she felt sick to her stomach that she had had time to escape but instead had chosen to remain in the bed, lured in by happy, romantic notions.

A shout came, then. "Hey! I have to go to work, so you two need to leave!"

It was just the roommate. The pressure in her throat loosened, and she nearly sighed with relief, though her heart was still beating loudly. Raoul was moving next to her, and together they clumsily slid out of the bed. He ran a hand through his hair and rubbed his face, obviously still tired.

Another loud knock came. "Hey! You guys need to get out!"

"We're coming!" Raoul snapped, rolling his eyes. He shoved the keys and his phone into his pocket and pulled his shoes on before grabbing her hand and leading her to the door. The roommate looked annoyed but remained silent as they crossed the apartment to the front door. Raoul merely said a short, cold, "Thanks," before opening the door and leaving.

"What a jerk," he said as they walked down the stairwell. She didn't reply, personally feeling grateful toward the rude guy who had unknowingly and forcibly reminded her of how serious the entire situation was.

After a few minutes, Raoul paused and looked back at her, frowning. "Want to jump on my back?" he offered. "Your feet probably still hurt."

She nodded immediately, beyond grateful that he had said something. She didn't want to complain when he was already doing so much for her, but she really didn't want to walk around barefoot any longer, particularly down the dirty stairwell and across a parking lot to his car. Her ripped dress made it a little awkward, especially with her exposed left leg, but Christine nearly sighed with relief as she rested her head on his shoulder, her arms loosely wrapped around his neck. He

was holding her legs, his hands still warm, and she blushed against him.

"Remember doing this when we were kids?" he asked.

Smiling, she nodded. "You were such a good sport as a kid. I made you carry me everywhere."

"I think at one point you were taller than I was," he said, laughing. "I kept falling over, but you were such a bully and made me carry you still."

She giggled, remembering. "Well, thanks for carrying me again, and I hope I'm still not bullying you into doing it."

"No way," he said. "You're not lanky and bony like you were as a kid. I like you there now. Feels nice."

Christine blushed deeply and leaned forward a little to kiss his cheek.

"Mm. Much better than when we were kids," Raoul said.

The car was stifling already in the summer morning heat, and Christine felt perspiration begin to line her forehead as soon as she closed the door. Raoul pulled his seatbelt on and inserted the key in the ignition. The car gave a grudging, whirring sound as the ignition turned, and Christine felt her stomach drop as it continued to whine but didn't start.

"That's weird..." Raoul said, frowning and trying again.

"Does it have enough gas?" she asked, her voice tight.

"Yeah, I just filled up two days ago," he said, letting the car whine as he held the key in the ignition for several long moments. It didn't start. Swearing softly, he tossed the keys aside and climbed out, pulling up the hood and looking into the engine. Christine remained in the car, her heart beating in her throat as she looked around the parking lot, half-expecting a black shadow to come flying out at her. She suddenly realized that she couldn't see Raoul, as the hood of the car obscured her vision, and she scrambled out, limping to the front.

He was frowning over the complicated-looking inside of the car, and Christine looked between it and him, hoping that sudden inspiration would strike, he would flip some hidden switch, and the car would magically work.

"This is stupid," he said angrily. "I got a tune-up a month ago. Everything looks fine. The battery's obviously not dead, the oil is fine. Maybe it's just too hot? I don't know." He sighed, rubbing his face. "I'm not really a mechanic. I guess we'll just have to take a taxi or something."

"And the car?" she said.

"We'll come back for it later today," he said, shrugging. "It should be okay here for a couple hours. The parking garage is covered. Maybe I'll look up some tutorial videos to see what I can do." He gave her another small smile and then let her climb up onto his back again to carry her out of the garage and onto a busy street. It took several minutes to hail a cab. They probably didn't look like the most promising riders, her barefoot and in a ripped dress and both of them in wrinkled, day-old clothes.

"Where are going to go?" Christine asked as yet another taxi drove by them.

Obviously getting frustrated, Raoul said, "Back to my apartment, I guess."

She paused. "I don't...I don't know if that's safe to go there."

"It's the middle of the day," Raoul said. "And I live on the sixth floor. He can't just sneak in there unnoticed. We need to change and eat, and I need to grab more cash and the rest of my stuff. We'll be in and out, okay?"

She nodded. "Okay." Although there was no doubt in her mind that Erik knew exactly where Raoul's apartment was, it was a little hard to imagine him lurking in there with the bright summer sun beating down on them. The panic of the night previously had receded somewhat, and although she was still nervous, she felt that she could see sense in Raoul's plan. No matter how skilled and talented Erik was, he couldn't just sneak into a sixth-floor apartment in broad daylight.

A taxi finally slowed and stopped for them, and Christine grabbed Raoul's hand tightly during the drive, as if he would disappear if she wasn't holding onto him.

"Look," Raoul said softly, squeezing her fingers softly, obviously sensing her distress. "It'll be fine, okay? I'll protect you, no matter what happens. I doubt he's at the apartment, anyway. Didn't you say that he didn't even try to chase you last night? Maybe he knows now that you don't want to be with him. Maybe he gets it and will leave us alone."

She wanted to believe his words. She desperately did, and she tried to. But somehow she couldn't, and when the taxi pulled up next to the apartment complex, the panic returned. Was he waiting for them there?

Raoul pulled out his wallet and ran his card through the machine to pay for the ride. There was a moment, and then the machine gave a soft, dull-sounding beep.

"Card declined," the driver said, his voice accented.

Frowning deeply, Raoul tried it again but with the same results. "I just used this yesterday!" he said, looking at it in annoyance. He sighed angrily and pulled out a different card. Christine held her breath as he ran it through. Another pause. But then another tired beep.

"Card declined," the driver repeated, sounding annoyed as well. "Cash?"

"I don't have any on me," Raoul said, patting his pockets. "I have some up in my apartment, though. I'll be right back. C'mon, Christine."

She made to follow him out of the cab. "No," the driver said quickly, looking angry. "She stays. You go and bring cash."

"I'm not leaving her here with you!" Raoul snapped. "Let's go, Christine."

"If you go, I call the police!" the driver threatened.

"I'll be right back with the cash!" Raoul argued. "I just can't leave her alone here!"

"Then she goes and you stay!" the cab driver said.

"No!" Raoul was obviously not going to back down on the issue. "We're both going."

"Then I call the police right now!" The driver pulled out his phone, and Christine, her stomach twisting, said quickly,

"No! Don't! It's all right. I'll...I'll stay."

"No, you won't," Raoul said. "I can't leave you here alone."

"It's okay," she said, even though she knew it wasn't. "Just hurry, please."

"I'm not leaving you!"

"He's going to call the police on us!" Christine said, grabbing his hand. "Please. It's okay."

Raoul glared at her and then at the cab driver before giving an irritated huff. "Fine. But don't sit in the cab." He handed over his cell phone after typing 911 onto the screen. "Call that if anything happens. I'll be back in a couple minutes." He pressed a kiss to her forehead before running into the building.

Awkwardly, terrified, and dirty, Christine stood next to the cab, Raoul's phone clutched tightly in her clammy hands. People walked by and gave her curious looks, but she tried to ignore them, hoping to soothe herself with the fact that it was broad daylight and she was standing in the middle of a well-trafficked street. Erik couldn't just appear out of nowhere and grab her. He wouldn't want anyone else to see.

No. She was all right. The person in danger now was...Raoul. Christine gave a choking gasp at the realization that she had sent him upstairs all alone. Had she just sent Raoul into horrible danger?

She took two quick steps away from the taxi, but the driver gave a short yell, an obvious sign that she had better not go anywhere. She looked up, not knowing which window was his but terrified that she would see something devastating...like a window breaking or a level being engulfed in flames.

"Please, please, please, please, please..." she chanted under her breath, glancing at the phone again. It had been three minutes. She waited. Two more minutes. Did it take longer than five minutes to go up to his apartment and come back down? She had never timed it.

Then six minutes. She was about to ignore the taxi driver and run into the building when she saw Raoul coming out through the front doors. It felt as if her whole body slumped in relief.

He hurried to the cab and practically threw some bills at the driver. "Here. Hope you're happy."

The driver didn't bother to respond. He counted the money and then drove away. Christine let out a small breath and threw her arms around him.

"I don't think we should do that again," she said, clutching him tightly. "Separate, I mean. We were just lucky this time..."

"We shouldn't have to," Raoul said. "And my apartment looks completely normal. Everything is where I left it last night. No one's there."

"Good," she said simply. She continued to hold onto Raoul as they went inside and to the elevator. She half-expected it to break down and trap them in there. But it rose smoothly to the sixth floor. She then expected to see Erik waiting outside as the elevator doors opened, but no one was. There was only an empty hallway of doors, and Raoul took her to the one near the end, letting her down as he fished in his pockets for the key.

Her heart was about to beat its way through her chest. She clung to him, hearing the lock click open and the doorknob turn. Holding her breath, she closed her eyes as the door opened, waiting to hear Erik's voice, waiting for his cold hands to rip her away. But there was nothing.

Raoul pulled her inside, and she looked around the empty, now-familiar apartment, feeling a little stupid now for freaking out at every turn, expecting Erik to jump out at her everywhere.

"That stupid cab driver," Raoul said, shaking his head as he went to the kitchen and flipped on the lights. "I'm just glad I had some cash here. He would've had us get a citation. It's not my fault my cards aren't working. I'll have to go to the bank today and see what's wrong. First my car and now this..."

Christine sat at the kitchen table, watching as he pulled out some cold cereal and milk.

"Hungry?" he said, putting the things in front of her. "Eat as much as you want. You probably need something in your system. I have some fruit...Some toast? What do you want?"

"This is fine," she whispered, pulling the box of cold cereal toward her. "Thank you."

She was glad when he joined her at the table, and they both ate quietly, apparently lost in their own thoughts. She ate several bowls of the cereal, unaware of how hungry she was until she actually began to eat. Raoul pulled out a couple bananas and handed one to her before stretching and saying,

"Okay. First, we should clean up a little bit. Find you some shoes, probably. Figure out what's going on with my cards and my car. We can't really get anywhere without money. If my car is still not working tonight, we can take a train somewhere. Or..." He frowned. "You don't have any ID?"

She shook her head. "It's all at the downtown apartment I stayed in."

"Well, we'll probably need a car, then, since you don't have to have ID to get anywhere. We can rent one, I guess."

"And go where?"

Raoul shrugged. "I have no idea. Where do you think we should go? My aunt and uncle's? Maybe we could even drive across the country and stay there for a month or so...just until things die down a little with him. What do you think?"

She didn't want to immediately tear the idea down, and so she shrugged and played with her spoon in the bowl for a while, unsure. The idea maybe sounded good

to Raoul only because he had no idea of just what Erik was capable of and what he could do. No—just driving away to the other side of the country wouldn't stop him. Once Erik found out, he would beat them there and wait for them. And it wasn't as if they could stay away forever. Raoul had school starting again soon, and so did she. They couldn't just leave their lives. Especially Raoul. She couldn't do that to him. He had worked so hard to get where he was, and she wouldn't ask him to give it all up to disappear in some small farm town in the middle of nowhere. There was nowhere they could go.

But maybe there was something they could do.

Christine glanced up at him, blushing.

"What?" he said, noticing her expression.

She wasn't sure if she could say it out loud, so instead she twisted her hands in her lap for a few moments, unsure of how to begin.

"What is it?" Raoul said, obviously trying to encourage her to say it.

"Erik...Erik loves me," she began awkwardly, her blush deepening.

There was a pause. "I know," Raoul replied. "You've told me."

"But I love you," she said.

"Well, I love you, too," he said, looking confused.

How was she supposed to say this? Even suggest it? Hesitantly, she said, "And...and two people in love. Like us. Sometimes they...stay together."

His confusion obviously deepened, and he ran a hand through his hair again. Christine took a little breath and tried again.

"I don't think just leaving the city will stop Erik," she said honestly. "But I think there might be something we could do that would..."

"Change our identities?" he joked.

She smiled weakly. "Kind of."

"What do you mean?"

She felt her blush come back, and then she suddenly wished she had never said anything at all. *This* would be more dangerous than simply running away. This would mean risking Raoul's safety. What would Erik do to him when he found out? What would he do to *her*?

"It would be so dangerous," she murmured.

"What would be?" Raoul said. He sighed and reached over to take her hand. "Just tell me what you're thinking," he said quietly. "I'm not a mind reader. But I promise I'll do whatever you think would be best to keep you safe."

"It's too much to ask of you," she stammered, her blush heating up her cheeks. "I couldn't..."

"Christine, you haven't even told me. I need to know before I can help you."

She swallowed harshly, feeling her hands shaking in his. "Well..." She stared at the table, unable to meet his gaze. "We could...get married." Her last two words were barely above a whisper.

"Married?" There was a long, long pause, and she waited, horrified that she had ruined everything, hating herself for even making that suggestion. She wished she could sink into the floor and disappear. The idea seemed stupid now, and she wanted Raoul to forget she had even suggested it.

"You'd really marry me?" he said.

She looked up to find that he was looking at her in something that resembled amazed confusion.

"It's too much to ask of you," she repeated quickly, trying to take back her suggestion. "This isn't how you should...should get married. I'm so sorry, Raoul. It was stupid of me. You—you probably don't even want to marry me, and then I suggested—"

"Wait. Christine." He smiled suddenly. "Didn't we talk about getting married all summer long? And didn't I just tell you that I love you?"

"But this is too much. Getting married like this would be...I can't ask you to do that."

"Fine. Then don't. I'll ask." To her shock, he slid off the chair and knelt next to her on one knee, holding her hands. "Christine Daae, will you marry me today?"

"It's too dangerous," she whispered. "Erik would..."

"What could he do?" Raoul said. "We'd be married, and that would be the end of it. We can go to the courthouse today and get a license. And then everything will be fine."

"But your—your family. Your aunt and uncle...and brother and sisters?"

"We can get married today legally and then have some kind of ceremony right before the semester starts. How's that? Then everyone would be happy. Especially me, because I love you and can't wait to marry you."

"But..." She looked at him carefully, his eyes blue and clear, his unshaven face alight with a wide smile, his lips smooth and inviting. "Really?"

"Yes. Let's get married, Christine! Let's get married today. I can't tell you how much I love you. And if marrying you means that you'll be protected, then it's just another reason on top of a thousand why I want to marry you in the first place."

Her heart was pounding, and tears filled her eyes. She giggled suddenly, feeling shy but excited. Ecstatic. And beyond afraid. Pushing the persistent trepidations

from her mind, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. He wrapped his arms around her waist and stood, pulling her up from the chair, and she laughed again and felt silly and beautiful when he spun her around a few times in the kitchen. After he set her down, he kissed her once more, deeply, his hands on her neck and jaw. She grabbed his wrinkled shirt tightly, unbelieving of all that had transpired in the past twenty-four hours.

They were interrupted a few moments later by the shrill ringing of a cell phone. Raoul gave a sigh and went over to the front room to look for it, and Christine stood there, flushed, shaking, disappointed that the phone had stopped them but knowing that things needed to be done in the right order for both of their safety. First they had to get married. *Then* they could continue. The thought brought a deep, pleasant blush to her cheeks. Her hands still trembling, she began to clean off the table. Raoul came back only a few moments later, shaking his head.

"No one there," he said. "Someone must have dialed by accident."

"Heh. Yeah." She swallowed her nervous laughter.

Raoul took the things from her hands. "You go take a shower," he said, pressing a quick kiss to her lips. "I'll finish this and then call the bank to figure out what's going on with my card. I'm sure a marriage license costs money."

The idea of being separated made her nervous, and she went over to the bathroom and peered in. Luckily the curtain was already pulled back, revealing an empty bathtub.

"I'm going to leave the door open," she said, trying not to sound embarrassed. "Just in case."

"I promise not to peek," he said, making her blush again.

She closed the door while undressing and then opened it in a towel. Raoul was still in the kitchen cleaning up. After stepping into the tub and pulling the curtain across, she tossed the towel aside and turned on the hot water.

The water felt cleansing in more ways than one. She breathed in the steam, letting it clear her head and wake her up completely. For the first few minutes, she resisted the urge to jump out of the tub and call the entire thing off. This was putting them *both* in danger. It wasn't just herself now. Raoul was involved. And...and she didn't want to marry Raoul just to protect herself. She wanted to marry him because she loved him. She *did*...but it was all so different than how she had wanted it to be. What if Raoul regretted it the moment he signed the marriage contract? What if he wasn't actually ready to marry her? They hadn't been together long at all. And now they were planning to marry. Most couples dated and became engaged years before actually getting married. Was that what Raoul had wanted? Time to actually spend together? Was she rushing or pressuring him?

However, she stayed in the tub and calmed herself down, letting the water soak her skin. They were going to be married, and then what could Erik do? There was nothing. He couldn't *force* them to divorce each other. And...maybe after she actually slept with Raoul, Erik wouldn't be as interested in her. She would get married, she would lose her virginity, and Erik would realize that he no longer had anything to gain from her.

She turned off the water and reached around the slick curtain to grab the towel, listening carefully. There were footsteps approaching the bathroom, and she held the towel around herself tightly, frozen, terrified.

"Hey, Christine? You're still...um, behind the curtain, right?"

Giving a silent breath of relief, she replied softly that she was.

"I texted my neighbor," Raoul said, taking a few steps into the bathroom. "She said you could borrow some of her clothes. I'll just leave them on the counter so you can change."

"Stay by the door after you close it!" she said quickly as she heard his footsteps retreat.

"Um, all right. If you want me to." The door closed, and she glanced into the bathroom to see it was empty. She grabbed the clothes and pulled them on, glad to be out of the ripped, wrinkled dress and in something clean and comfortable. It was a red t-shirt and a pair of black leggings. She wouldn't have worn either of those things normally, but she wasn't going to be picky in this situation. When completely dressed, she pulled the door open to see Raoul still there, smiling at her.

"Much better," he approved. "She brought some shoes for you, too. They're by the front door."

She nodded, making a note to thank his neighbor at a later time.

"I'm going to shower really quickly, and then we have to go to the bank. They couldn't figure it out over the phone. Then we'll go to the courthouse and get married, okay?"

Again, a nod, and her stomach fluttered nervously at the thought.

"Oh! I almost forgot." He took her hand and led her back to the kitchen. "There's strawberry ice cream in the freezer, just waiting for you." He pulled it out and set it on the table, and she laughed and almost started crying at the sight of it. Doing so would probably be a bit too difficult to explain why, and so she merely hugged him tightly, murmuring a 'thank you.'

He went to the bathroom, and after a few minutes she heard the shower start to run. Christine took a spoon from the drawer and sat at the kitchen table, opening the lid to the ice cream. She didn't feel like getting out a bowl.

It was quiet in the apartment. The shower became background noise after a few minutes, and she pushed away the ice cream after a while, too nervous and excited to eat any more. She had felt hopeful, doubtful, fearful, and brave within the last few hours. The idea of actually marrying Raoul thrilled her and filled her with dread at the same time. It made her head spin to think about.

She got up out of the chair to put the ice cream back in the freezer, and her legs shook a little. Pausing, she took a deep breath. No. She was excited about this. She *wanted* to marry Raoul. However, she couldn't seem to make it another step, and she put her hands on the table for support, breathing heavily, her head still spinning. The running water from the shower sounded like dull white noise, far away, muffled.

Christine breathed deeply, feeling herself prickle with perspiration again. Her stomach was churning, and her mind was growing numb.

No, no. I want to do this. I want to marry Raoul. We'll be safe.

Nausea built up, and she coughed for few moments. To her horror, she felt her legs giving way, and she sank to the cold floor, the tile seeping in through the leggings. Was she going to pass out? All because of nerves? Because of fear? But she wasn't afraid to marry Raoul! That would mean she didn't love him, and she did love him. So why was her body betraying her?

Her eyes became heavy, and she opened her mouth to try to call out to Raoul but found that her voice wouldn't work. All that came out was an inaudible sigh. She slumped backward, and after another moment, hands slipped around her back, pulling her up.

"There, now," a quiet voice murmured. "You have had your little adventure, haven't you? And now it is time for you to return to Erik."

And although the pressure in her chest grew to a painful level, and her throat seized up trying to scream, and her eyes fluttered trying to stay open, her mind and body drifted away as she felt herself being lifted up and taken.

Chapter 21: Chapter 21

New York had drawn her back in.

She looked around from the windows of the taxi, remembering the last time she had been here. It had been raining then. But the summer evening was warm and bright, and there were plenty of people out and about. She wished she had gotten a hotel closer to the restaurant, as it would have been nice to walk. Still, she had opted to wear a pair of heels, so maybe it was best that she hadn't walked anyway. Before coming, she had worried a few times if there was any possibility of running into Raoul, but after checking his social media pages, she saw that he had gotten a prestigious internship in Paris and would be gone until the upcoming fall semester. It had been surreal to read and realize. Raoul was back in Paris, and she was back in New York.

Her stay here wouldn't be for very long, though. Tonight and tomorrow night, and then she would be going back to her little apartment a few hours north. She had...*some* semblance of a life to get back to. Her part-time job. The kids at the hospital. And her cat. She had left it at an overpriced pet boarding business. They had promised cage-free, all-natural food and intensive one-on-one care of and bonding with her pet, and Christine had rolled her eyes a little but left the cat there. At least it would be well taken care of, apparently.

It wasn't the most thrilling of prospects to return to, but at least there she...

She couldn't think of anything, and so she left those thoughts and chose instead to focus on the upcoming dinner.

Savino de Rege had replied two days later, which had surprised and excited her. He had been extremely polite in his message and had said that yes, he had done a lot of business with Erik in the past and would be happy to talk to her about it.

As luck would have it, Miss Daae, I will be in New York within the week to take care of some business in the States. If you would like, I would be more than willing to meet with you for an evening to discuss this.

She hadn't bothered to tell him that she didn't actually live in New York anymore but had instead replied that she would also be 'more than willing' to meet. He had then made arrangements at a restaurant in the city, and Christine was glad she had looked it up before leaving. It was extremely pricey, and apparently reservations had to be made months in advance. Had she not known, she probably would have gone to the restaurant in jeans and tennis shoes and not been allowed inside.

Nervously, she checked her cell phone. She was going to be a few minutes late. Hopefully that wouldn't be too rude. Savino's suggestion of meeting in a public place had lifted some of her worries. He couldn't slap her or point a gun at her there. She would be safe. And tomorrow, she was going to a nice spa to simply relax for a day before leaving the city the next morning.

She hadn't prepared any questions and had simply brought a blank notebook to write down anything interesting. This time she wasn't pretending to be anyone else and was hoping that the conversation would be much more relaxed and natural than it had been with her awful impersonations with Dr. Khan and Madeleine. She had, though, practiced a little to be sure that she would be able to give Savino a watered-down story of what had happened between her and Erik. There was no need for him to know that Erik had been in love with her, that he had trapped her, that he had...

There was no need for him to know any of that. He simply needed to know that Erik had taught her during the summer but had had to leave New York for...work-related reasons. Or something.

The taxi pulled up to the sidewalk, and Christine paid the driver. To her surprise, the door was opened for her, and she looked up in confusion. A man in a suit was there, and she frowned and exited the car, murmuring a bewildered 'thank you.' The restaurant had wide, clean glass doors, and she clutched her purse tightly and walked toward it somewhat hesitantly, aware that her clothing was not designer and her shoes had been on clearance when she had bought them. Madeleine's condescending smirk came to mind, and Christine huffed in anger and irritation, trying to hold her head up high.

It was bright and inviting in the restaurant, and she was greeted politely by a dark-haired man in a tuxedo with an accent she couldn't place.

"I'm...I think I'm supposed to meet someone here," she said, looking around. "Savino de Rege? I'm Christine Daae..."

The man gave a short, knowing, "Ah, of course," and Christine felt herself slump just a little in relief as she followed him through a small hallway and into the dining hall. It was full of finely-dressed people talking quietly, sipping on expensive wines with a man playing the piano in the corner. Christine felt her heart lurch for a second. It was Liszt's *Liebestraum*, a piece Erik had played for her several times. The man sitting at the piano was not Erik, of course, but it still made her hands shake and her mouth go dry.

Luckily, she was distracted from the music as the host showed her to the table. Savino de Rege was there smiling, and a woman was sitting next to him. The man in the tuxedo insisted on pulling the chair out for her, and she let him scoot it back in a little bit before leaving with a short bow of his head.

There was a moment of silence, and then Savino sat down as well. The woman next to him was very slim and beautiful, her dark hair twisted up elegantly and diamonds dripping from her ears. Christine blushed a little; she had forgotten to put on any jewelry besides the silver bracelet that she now wore out of habit.

Just as she was about to open her mouth to say an awkward 'hello,' Savino leaned forward.

"It is a great honor to meet you, Miss Daae," he said, his light Italian accent somewhat charming. "I am glad you are here."

"Yeah," she said. "Thanks for...inviting me. Sorry I'm a little late."

Savino waved a hand. "It is no matter." Then he gestured to the woman next to him and said, "This is my wife, Amelia."

The woman nodded, smiling just slightly, and the fact that he was married made Christine relax just a bit more, though she wasn't really sure why. She didn't expect anything treacherous or dangerous, but another woman at the table was somehow reassuring.

"Nice to meet you," Christine said. "And thank you again for agreeing to meet with me, Mr. de Rege. I know it was probably really...unexpected."

"It was," Savino said. "But then again, I wouldn't expect anything else when it comes to dealing with our masked friend."

Her stomach twisted, and she sat up a little straighter. It had been months since she had talked to anyone about Erik, and though she was nervous, she was by now a little excited as well.

The waiter then arrived, and there were several minutes of discussion about wines and courses. There were no menus, and Christine sat there, unsure. Savino asked her after another minute if she had any wishes for their wine, and she said, blushing, "Oh—I don't really drink. Sorry..."

Savino frowned just a little and looked at her closely. Then he shrugged. "Do not be sorry, Miss Daae. Only be comfortable here."

The waiter rattled off the courses for the evening. Christine had no idea what any of it was. She caught the words "quail," "seasoned," and something about white chocolate in the dessert.

Erik had never taken her to any of these kind of restaurants before. They had still been absurdly high-end, but there had always been menus, and she had always recognized at least *something* on them. And they had always had strawberry ice cream if she had wanted it. Looking around the dining hall, with its marble floors and chandeliers and high, draped windows, Christine doubted that they would have any sort of ice cream here.

The wine was dark and red, and Savino offered some to her one more time before finally giving up. She felt a little childish sitting there with her water, but alcohol always made her sick to her stomach, and she wasn't going to get sick just to try to feel less awkward.

Erik had teased her about it a few times, though it had never been mean-spirited.

How are you to enjoy the luxuries of this world if you will not taste even a drop of them?

Well, we shall not go to southern France, now shall we? That entire region is wasted to us. We will have to go somewhere where there is not a drop of alcohol to poison you.

She sat for a few moments before realizing Savino had spoken again, and she blinked, bringing herself back to the present.

"I'm sorry, what?" she said, blushing again.

"I asked if you had lived in New York long," Savino repeated.

"Oh—not long," she said evasively. "Just...ever since I came here last summer."

"I like this city," Savino said. "I try to come many times in the year. Amelia is from New York, too."

"Yes," Amelia said. "I love London, but it's always nice to come home."

The small talk felt awkward. Christine played with the napkin on her lap, twisting it in her fingers. She glanced over to the pianist again. He was still playing Liszt.

Savino noticed and said, "You do not like the music?"

Her cheeks still warm, she quickly looked back to him. "No, it's fine. I...I like this piece. I'm sorry. I'm not normally so...distracted."

Their first courses arrived, giving Christine a few minutes to gather herself and mentally scold herself for being so unfocused. She noticed that Amelia did not pick up her cutlery until Savino had begun to eat, and she followed suit, wondering if it was an Italian custom that they had incorporated into their marriage. Erik had never eaten in front of her, something she had eventually gotten used to but had never liked. Even after taking off his mask...She did feel bad that he had hidden himself for so long. But given the way she had reacted to his face, she didn't blame him for doing his best to prevent her from seeing anything.

"So, Miss Daae," Savino then said. "I suppose we should start, yes?"

"Yes, please," Christine said gratefully. "Like I said in my email, I'm not really sure how you two know each other, just that you did business together."

Savino nodded. "And you were also not specific in your email about how you two know the other," he said, smiling slightly.

Christine paused and then said carefully, "He was my music instructor."

"Really?" Savino set down his cutlery. "How did you two lose contact?"

"He said he had an emergency...overseas," she said, hoping her blush wasn't returning to give away her lie. "He left before he told me where he was going."

"And he will not be back to continue teaching you?"

She shook her head.

Savino nodded again and looked deep in thought for a while. Another course arrived, and Christine was glad they were small portions.

After another minute, she felt it safe to continue and asked, "And...and how did you two know each other?"

"Business," Savino said easily. "He was first a customer. I had a company. *Inoltrare*. Then he came to Milan to work with me for a time."

"Really? What did he do?"

"He did many things," Savino said. "Technological developments for the company. New product design. It was good to have him."

"What about when the company went under?" She then blushed more deeply than ever as Savino looked at her sharply, a frown on his mouth for the first time that evening. "I'm sorry," she stammered. "I...I read it online. I'm sorry. You don't have to tell me."

There was a pause, and a waiter came to refill her water, which she gladly drank, trying to cool down her hot blush. Luckily Savino waved his hand after a moment and shrugged.

"The company fell apart. He left Milan. I don't know where. Then I went to London. Very simple, I suppose."

Christine put her hands back in her lap and twisted the napkin again, biting her lip before asking hesitantly, "Did you...um, like him? I mean...what did you think of him as a person?"

The smile was back. "You know him as well, Miss Daae. What do *you* think?"

"I guess...well, yeah, I liked him. He's brilliant. And a good teacher."

"Perhaps...an acquired taste?" Savino suggested, and Christine actually laughed at that.

"Exactly."

"And now you want to get into contact with him again?"

She paused and then felt her stomach flip again. Her head spun a little. She had forgotten that she had included that in her email to Savino. "Um...well." She looked at him. "You would know how to?"

"I have some ways."

The prospect of seeing *Erik* again...Of course, she had wondered over the past several months what that would mean, but she had never *really* considered it. She had put that in the email to Savino only because it would be too hard to explain to him that she wanted to know everything about Erik without actually seeing him again. Half of the time, she couldn't even explain it to herself.

Late at night, sometimes she would lie in her bed and ask herself why she *didn't* simply try to get in contact with him again. Then she would quickly push that thought out and squeeze her eyes shut. There had been that incident with the blog post...when she had been so close...

But now Savino said he had ways of getting in contact with Erik again. And that was making her stomach churn. Her head wouldn't stop spinning. The idea seemed more real than ever, and it was making her dizzy.

"Miss Daae," Savino then said. "If you would like, I could find him." A long pause followed. "I do not think he was merely your music instructor, you know..."

She looked at him sharply. Perspiration was starting to line across her forehead, and she put a hand on her temple, trying to get her mind to stop spinning.

"I'm..." she murmured. Was she going to throw up? And how could Savino say something like that to her! He had no idea...She had been careful. She hadn't said anything to him regarding the complicated relationship she had had with the masked man.

But she could barely form a coherent thought now. Her hands were shaking, and she took a deep breath. The room seemed to fade in and out of focus. The dizzy sensations were all strangely familiar, but she couldn't concentrate enough to remember where she had felt them before.

"Are you all right?" she heard Amelia ask.

Maybe if she just went to the bathroom...She could throw up there and clear her mind a little...

Her hands could barely lift the napkin out of her lap, and she set it on the table, trying to push herself up and trying to explain that she just needed a moment, just a few minutes alone to try to sort it all out. Her knees would not support her, though, and she buckled as soon as she stood. She could faintly hear a gasp. The room was spinning. Grabbing onto the table for support, she tried once more to push herself up and take a step, but she couldn't. More gasps came, these ones louder, and she realized that she was falling down and that she suddenly couldn't see anything anymore, couldn't feel anything, couldn't think.

It took her several minutes to register that she was conscious again. There was a murmur of voices next to her, but she couldn't understand what they were saying. Her body felt sluggish and her head could barely function. The most immediate sensations she could recognize was thirst and a headache.

Giving a feeble moan, she did her best to open her eyes. They seemed to be weighed down and unable to move. A pressure was suddenly on her left side.

"Christine?"

It took a few more minutes of lying there before she could remember anything at all. And when she did, she forced her eyes open. The room and bed were completely unfamiliar.

For some reason, she had half-expected to see the bedroom of Erik's basement apartment. The fact that it was not caused her heart to constrict a little.

Her mouth dry, her head still aching, she looked over and saw a man standing there. After a moment of half-conscious terror, she recognized Savino de Rege. He was frowning over her. And behind him was another man. The terror came back. Who was the other man? Where was she? Why couldn't she move or even think?

"It's all right, Miss Daae," Savino then said, reaching down to place a hand on her shoulder. She didn't want him touching her. "You fainted at the restaurant. You are in my apartment. And you are fine. This is Dr. Moretti. He says you passed out from stress."

The man behind him was nodding, and Christine continued to stare, trying to move her mouth and ask to please be taken to a hospital...or to be taken back to her hotel, at the very least. The most she could do was mumble incoherently.

"You should rest more," Savino said, his hand still on her. "I think you are not well."

It all rushed into her in a wave of confused emotions. She was in an unknown apartment, half-conscious with no idea how or why. And she hardly knew the man standing next to her. Tears sprang to her eyes, and she squeezed them shut, willing her mind to function, to somehow clear away the fog and actually process what was happening and come up with some kind of solution. She breathed deeply. How long had she actually been here?

Several minutes passed, and she sensed Savino and the doctor draw back from the bedside but remain in the room. She managed to calm herself just a little. It wouldn't be any help to start panicking. And there really wasn't anything to panic about. She had just gotten too worked up at the restaurant, and Savino had been concerned enough to call a doctor instead of just dropping her off at some overcrowded New York hospital.

These thoughts slowed her breathing more, and she worked on moving her hands and arms, flexing her fingers and bringing a hand up to press against her sweaty forehead. Opening her mouth, she tried one more time, her voice a hoarse, rasping croak:

"What happened?"

"You fainted," Savino said again, coming close to the bed. "It would not be good to not take care of you. Dr. Moretti says you will be fine. You simply need to rest."

"I want...the hotel..." She tried to look around for her purse. The address was in her phone.

"Hotel?" Savino repeated. "You mean your apartment, Miss Daae?"

She had told him she lived in New York, hadn't she? It was hard to keep things straight at this point, and Christine simply nodded.

"I will have you taken when you are well again," Savino said. "Perhaps one more day here until you are better."

No, now. She wanted to go now.

"There is some water here," Savino then said. "You should have some. Yes, Dr. Moretti? She should have some, no?"

A glass was pressed into her hands, and she felt Savino help her sit up a bit to drink it. Although she was embarrassed, the water woke her up more than anything, and she blinked rapidly. The headache was still there, but it was dull and not as distracting. She clumsily gulped down the entire glass, not caring that some of it spilled down her chin. And when that glass was emptied, Savino brought her another one which she eagerly drank.

More coherent now, she shakily managed to push herself up and rest against the headboard of the bed. She was still in the dress she had worn at the restaurant, and she was thankful for that.

The room was somewhat small, hardwood floors and one window. Even though the walls were painted white and spotless, it felt dark in the room. She could see through the window that the sun was shining brightly, but it didn't seem to fall into that bedroom.

Rubbing her eyes, she continued to wake herself up more, and then she looked at Savino, who was still watching her.

"I'm so sorry for the trouble I caused," she whispered. "I don't know what happened."

"I am glad I can help any way," he said. "I have food for you ready. It is only light things that will not make you sick." He looked over at Dr. Moretti, who nodded and left the room.

Christine glanced around the bedroom again. "This is your apartment?"

"Yes," Savino said. "Well, it is a small guest bedroom in the apartment."

"But you live in London," she stated, trying to understand.

His smile returned. "I do, Miss Daae. But I have an apartment here as well."

"For Amelia?" she said.

His smile widened just a bit. "Yes. For Amelia."

There was a knock on the door, and Savino went to open it. She couldn't see past him, but she saw him take something, and he returned with a tray of fruits and breads and cheeses, which he placed over her lap. There was a chair in the corner, and he pulled it next to the bed.

"Please. Eat something," Savino said. "It is important you feel better."

The food did look appetizing, and so Christine began, feeling self-conscious as she ate in front of him. She tried to eat as neatly and quietly as possible, but her hands were still shaking just slightly, resulting in her dropping some grapes and strawberries as she tried to put them in her mouth. Her blush had returned in full effect.

To try to fill the silence, she said, "Where is she?"

"Who?" Savino said.

"Amelia." The bread was very high-quality, and she tried not to eat too much too fast.

"Oh. She is out. She was very worried last night, but the doctor said you are fine. And she had to do business in the city."

Christine nodded and continued to eat. The headache was receding slightly, and more feeling was returning throughout her body. She still felt slightly groggy, but she was just grateful that she could actually move, function, and speak.

"Miss Daae, I would like to talk to you about our masked friend some more," Savino then said quietly, and Christine dropped another strawberry and looked up at him quickly.

"What? Why?" Her voice was a whisper.

"You said you wished to see him again?"

"I..." She looked down at her food, blushing.

"The red tells me many things," Savino said. When she glanced at him in confusion, he reached over and lightly stroked her warm cheek. She resisted the urge to slap his hand away or recoil. His smile was still there, and he continued: "He was not only a teacher. No?"

Clearing her throat, she said, "He was just...he taught me how to sing. That's it. Nothing else."

"I do not believe that."

"Then you're wrong," she said shortly, but her blush was deepening, and she couldn't meet his gaze. Her heart was starting to pound.

"Miss Daae, maybe you tell things to yourself. Then you believe them. But they are not true. He did bad things to you. To your old fiance."

She looked back at him, eyes wide, heart in her throat. He looked calm, a smile slightly touching his lips.

"But you are still looking for him. Why? I know. And you know, too."

She was shaking her head wordlessly, helplessly, but he ignored her and said,

"I have a deal for you, Miss Daae."

***Chapter 22*: Chapter 22**

Christine instantly scrambled out of the bed, the tray flipping over and the uneaten food spilling over the clean bedclothes. Her legs shook as she stood, and she grabbed onto the headboard so she wouldn't fall, staring at Savino, who continued to sit on the other side of the bed, watching her calmly.

"I want to go," she whispered.

"You have not heard my idea," Savino said.

"I don't want to," she said. "I want to go. Please. I won't...I just want my purse. I'll take a taxi."

"Please sit down, Miss Daae," he said. "You are still not well."

She took a few unsteady steps, looking around for her purse and shoes. Neither were in the bedroom as far as she could see, and tears suddenly filled her eyes. Her breath was disappearing, and she grabbed the bed again, leaning over it, trembling.

"If you do not want to see him again, then that is fine, too," he said. "But you are important right now, Miss Daae. And you are not a good liar." He was silent for another moment. "Sit down," he repeated. "I will have someone clean the bed."

Knowing she was about to fall over anyway, Christine sank to the bed, sitting on the far end of it, away from the mess she had made and from Savino, who kept watching her. Simply watching calmly, still slightly smiling. Why was he smiling?

"Can I have my purse?" she tried again. "Please."

"Soon. I give you a promise. I first need your help."

"My help?" she said.

"Yes," he said. Then he gave a dramatic sigh. "Miss Daae, do you know man's great weakness?"

"What? What are you talking about?" She wanted him to stop. She wanted her purse, and she wanted her shoes, and she wanted a taxi to go back to her hotel. Then she would return to her apartment, pick up her cat, and never look for answers again.

"The great problem men have," he said. "It is a weakness we have. It is a dangerous mistake in our blood. Something that no man can get away from."

"N-no. I...please stop. Just...just let me go. Please."

"I will, Miss Daae. I promise. But you know it?" He continued to smile, like this was some pleasant conversation between two friends. Christine stared back before finally saying,

"No..."

"Well, every man has it," Savino said. "And no matter what our masked friend looks like on the outside, it seems that he is still a man on the *inside*."

"I don't..." What if she started screaming? Would the doctor come back to help her? Maybe Amelia was home and would help her. She wouldn't let Savino do this to her, right? Amelia wouldn't let her husband trap her here.

"There is no reason to lie to me anymore, Miss Daae," Savino said. "I know it all. How he hurt you and your old fiance. He was mad, wasn't he? Insane with love for you."

The tears were there now. They dripped down her cheeks when she blinked. He was right; there was no point denying it when he knew everything. But she still couldn't seem to bring herself to say anything to affirm his statements. So she sat there.

"At first I could not believe this," he said. "That *mostro* is heartless. But all men must love women. And they will love them deeply and do everything to protect them. That is the weakness, Miss Daae. The mistake. He will do anything for you."

"He's gone," she whispered. "He's...I have no idea where he is."

"But he will come back for you."

"He won't," she said. "He thinks I married Raoul."

Savino smiled almost indulgently, like she was a little child who was trying to solve a simple math problem. "Please do not pretend to be stupid," he said. "You know he will come for you."

"What—what are you going to do?" Kill him? Kill her?

He shook his head. "It is not bad. I am not a bad man. He stole from me, you know? From my company. He stole six million Euros."

Christine felt her stomach drop a little. She could not even imagine that much money.

"I only want the money back," Savino said. "With interest. That is all. I do not want to hurt him. There. It is simple, you see? Not bad."

"But...I don't know where he is. I don't know how to contact him."

"That is easy," Savino said. "You will not have to do anything. Perhaps I will take a few pictures of you to show him. Or a video. Only to make him come. And once I have the money, I will give you your things and let you go. I will even give you some of it, if you would like. Perhaps ten thousand dollars. Is that enough for you?"

She felt sick and tried one more time: "He doesn't...He won't come. He doesn't care. I hurt him too much before he left."

Savino sighed again and stood, tugging on his sleeves to straighten them. "I will show you some of the apartment, Miss Daae. Come."

It was obvious that he didn't believe her and had chosen to simply ignore her protests. She didn't want to leave the room, afraid of what was waiting outside of the door, but there was also a chance that she would have an opportunity to escape. Maybe Amelia would be back, and she could beg her to make Savino let her go. Or she could find the doctor and tell him what was happening.

Wrapping her arms around her torso, she stood as well and followed him out of the door, amazed that her legs were carrying her.

The apartment was sleek, modern, expensive, and large. Several doors remained shut, and Savino led the way, saying, "There are many rooms in here you cannot go to. But you can use the bedroom, and there is a bathroom close to it. And there is a television in this room. You like movies? There are books, too. You cannot go to the kitchen, but do not worry. You will eat whatever you like." He glanced around at her, smiling a little again. "You do not need to be uncomfortable here, Miss Daae. It will only be a few days."

She never saw a door that looked like it led outside, and through the windows, she could see that they were high up, meaning she couldn't break a window and escape that way. Maybe she could break it and scream for help, but this was New York, and she knew nobody would hear her. There was no sign of her purse or shoes anywhere.

As he was showing her how to work the television (she stared blankly and didn't listen at all), there came from behind a door a few short, loud barks. Christine jumped and squeaked in alarm. Savino laughed a little and went over to the door. Before she could protest, he had opened it, and two large dogs barreled out and went to him, sitting by him and panting. Savino scratched their ears and said things to them in Italian.

Christine had immediately darted behind the couch, perspiration stinging her and her heart rate elevating once again. The dogs looked horrible, big with black fur and pointed ears and docked tails. She could easily imagine both of them lunging at her, teeth bared, snarling and foaming.

Savino glanced over at her. "This is Lupo," he said, petting one. Then, pointing to the other, he said, "That is Siro. They are good dogs. Very obedient. They were with me since they were little. They only do what I tell them."

That merely scared Christine further, and she grabbed the couch to keep from swaying. What if he ordered them to attack her? If she didn't do what he said, he probably would.

"Mr. de Rege," she said at last, trying not to look at the dogs. If Savino knew how terrified she was of them, he would use it against her. "What if...what if Erik actually doesn't pay?"

"He will, Miss Daae," Savino said, petting his dogs and still speaking to them in Italian.

"But...but what if he doesn't? What are you going to do with me?"

Savino shrugged. "I like you, Miss Daae. I have no plan to keep you forever."

She could have fainted with relief. Then she said, "How long are you going to keep me, then?"

"Until he pays." One of the dogs barked loudly, and Christine flinched. Savino snapped at it in curt Italian, and both dogs lay down obediently.

"But if he doesn't? How long?" A little voice was telling her that she was pestering him too much, but she had to know.

"I do not know yet," he said.

"But—I have to get back!" she said. "I have a job at home. And—and I have a cat." It sounded pathetic.

"With ten thousand dollars, you can be able to not have a job for some time," Savino said. "And you can buy any cat."

"But..."

"No," Savino suddenly said, looking angry for the first time. It was frightening, and she gulped and resisted the urge to duck behind the sofa fully. "This is enough. You need to know nothing more. Tonight we will start. Right now you will go to your room."

The dogs, maybe sensing his anger, lifted their heads to watch her. One even started growling softly, and Christine, not waiting for another word, ran from the room and back to the bedroom, slamming the door shut behind her. Still exhausted, sick, and now horrified beyond belief, she lay down on the newly-made, clean bed and sobbed until she couldn't breathe. She took a few minutes to fill up her lungs, and then she burst into more sobs, only stopping once she had exhausted herself. She fell asleep for several hours, spent from her tears and still a little groggy from earlier, and when she woke, she prayed more fervently than ever that it had all been a terrible dream and she was somewhere else. She was in her apartment with the cat. Or she was at her apartment near the university. Or—or she would even be happy to see the prison bedroom in Erik's apartment.

But no. It was the small, dark room, darker now because the sun was almost gone. She slid from the bed and went to the window, looking out. The apartment was very high up, and she could see a street below her. No one down there had any idea that the stupid Christine Daae was being held prisoner for the second time in her life. She wanted to scream.

There was a knock on the door, and she flinched at the sound. It opened, and Savino entered. Thankfully, his dogs were not with him.

"Miss Daae?" he said. "You are awake. Good. I have food for you. But first I will take some pictures. Then you can eat."

Her stomach was growling, and she looked at him in exhaustion. "Please don't do this..." she tried again.

Savino rolled his eyes impatiently. "I am not hurting anyone, Miss Daae. He stole from me. You think that is bad, yes? He should repay. That is what you believe. That is what I believe, too. And you are only giving him...*incentive* to do it." He took a few steps closer. "Maybe he will pay tonight, and then tomorrow I will let you go. You would like that, no?"

"What if—what if I somehow talk to him instead?" she said. "If you contacted him, then I could come back when you found him and ask him to repay you. He'd do it if I asked. Right? You said he would do anything for me."

"That is not how it works," Savino said. "He must know you are in danger. Or else why would he pay?"

"But—you said I'm not in any danger!" Christine said, choking.

Instead of answering, Savino whistled, and Christine nearly shrieked when the two dogs trotted in obediently.

"I think you don't like them," Savino said, watching her closely. She was cowering behind the bed, sick to her stomach. "They do anything I say."

"Please don't," she whispered. "Please. Please."

He said something to them in soft Italian, and they approached her. Christine screamed and sank to the ground, putting her arms over her head. She could feel them near her. Their cold noses pressed against her, and even though a rational part of her mind told her that they weren't growling at her, weren't acting aggressively in any way, she could not listen to it. All she could feel was their warm breath and the fact that both of them were near her. She was sobbing again, curled up on the floor, nearly hyperventilating. One of them was sniffing her hair and her ear and then pressed its wet nose against her cheek. She screamed again. She would have done *anything* to make him call the dogs away from her.

After what felt like hours, there was another whistle, and the dogs left her. She continued to lie on the floor, crying weakly. There were footsteps, and she felt Savino behind her.

"Let me see your pretty face," Savino then said, and she took a shuddering breath and glanced up in confusion. He was holding a phone, and she realized, with a horrible jerk of her stomach, that he was filming a video. Immediately, she buried her face in her arms again.

A moment later, Savino said, "That was very good, Miss Daae. Now I will take one picture, and you can eat and sleep."

What was she supposed to do? If she refused, he would send the dogs back over. Miserably, she climbed to her feet, still shaking.

"Look at me, please," he said, and she did so. There was a soft *clicking* sound, and he gave her another smile. "That was not hard, see? And tomorrow I will bring you nice clothes to wear."

When he returned with her food a few minutes later, she said, her voice hoarse and weak, "Mr. de Rege? Um...can I talk to Amelia, please? Is she back yet?"

He looked confused for a moment and then laughed quietly. "Oh. Miss Daae. I am sorry. I lied to you. I am not married."

Her heart sank in her chest. "What? Then who was that woman?"

"Anyone will do anything in New York for money," he said. "I am sorry to lie. I only wanted you to be comfortable at dinner. I know women are comfortable with other women."

So the woman had been in on it, too. She had known the whole time that they were only there to lie to Christine and trick her. To kidnap her.

She looked down at her plate of pasta, and Savino, maybe knowing she had nothing else to say, gave her a nod of his head and left the room. There was a minute of silence as she waited to see if he would return, and when he didn't, she picked up the fork and began to eat numbly.

How could this have happened to her again?

Was there anyone quite as stupid? Quite as naive and gullible? She was disgusted with herself, terrified, and devastated. There was no way to escape this time. She had a feeling that Savino wouldn't be taking her out to restaurants or symphonies to try to please her. He wouldn't be bringing her new books and music with tentative, fearful hope in his eyes that today would be the day she would finally look at him and speak with him. Savino wouldn't stand in the doorway and tell her repeatedly that he worshiped her.

No. He was a cold businessman, and he was doing what he could to make Erik pay back what he had stolen.

It didn't surprise her that he had stolen. Maybe that was what had caused Savino's company to collapse in the end, and maybe Savino hated Erik all the more because of it. But she still had so many things she didn't understand. How would Savino actually contact Erik? Would Erik pay? Of course he would...but...

What if he didn't?

What if somehow he was never contacted? Or what if he didn't believe Savino? Or what if he simply didn't care? The thought was torture, and Christine set aside the half-eaten plate of food, falling onto the bed and staring at the ceiling, more tears in her eyes. Just how long would she have to stay here before Savino finally accepted the fact that Erik didn't care about her anymore? There was also a horrifying thought that Savino would be so angry about it and would use his dogs to vent his frustrations.

And she didn't want any of that money, should Savino actually get it. If Erik did pay, and Savino let her go, she wouldn't take a single cent of her own ransom money. And then...if Erik did pay, and Savino let her go, what then? Simply leave...go back to her apartment after picking up her cat...and just pretend like it never happened? She was sure that Savino would threaten her and make her not tell the police what had happened. He already knew too much about her. Undoubtedly there was something he knew about that he could threaten her with.

She slept fitfully throughout the night, dozing and then waking, hoping that she was somewhere else and giving a painful little gasping whimper when she saw the dark bedroom. The apartment was quiet, but she was too afraid to get up and see if the door was unlocked. What if the dogs were sitting by it, guarding it so she didn't try to leave?

The sunlight creeping slowly into the bedroom found her curled up in the chair, staring out of the window. People had already been walking the streets for an hour, early-risers on their way to work or running errands. She was supposed to be heading back to her apartment today. What would they do with her cat? She had only paid for its care until this evening. Would they give it back to the shelter? The thought made her tear up a little. Even though she hadn't even named the cat, it had kept her company during dark moments of lonely depression. She didn't want it to be put back in the shelter. And then there was her job. She was supposed to be going back tomorrow. They would fire her if she didn't show up.

There was a knock on the door when the sun was fully risen, and Savino entered, smiling still, holding a plate of cold breakfast, as well as what looked like a shopping bag.

"I have nice clothing for you," he said, setting it by the bed. "And food, when you want to eat."

She tried to look around him to make sure he was alone, and he laughed a little when he noticed.

"No, they are not here. They are out for walking. That is better for you, no?"

Her face flushed, though she felt a hot spike of anger work its way through her. How could he laugh at her like that when he clearly knew how terrified she was of them?

Still, the fact that they weren't there emboldened her a little, and she stood up.

"Has Erik contacted you yet?"

A frown touched the corners of his mouth. "No. Perhaps he is too far away to transfer the money. That is fine. I think tonight it will be done."

He let her out to freshen up as best she could in the bathroom. There was no way she was going to shower, and so she merely did her best to clean herself with water from the sink while keeping on as much clothing as possible. He had brought her a light casual dress, which annoyed her. She had been wearing a crumpled dress for the past two days and wanted pants and a t-shirt. Still, it was cleaner than the one she was currently wearing and at least smelled fresh, and so she pulled it on.

When she went back to the room, she picked up the plate of breakfast and then looked at Savino.

"Mr. de Rege...please," she said softly. "If you're not going to let me go today, at least let me make some calls. I need to call my job and tell them I won't be in, and I need to call the kennel and make sure they keep my cat longer. Please. I'm afraid that they'll get rid of it if I don't contact them. I'll put the phone on speakerphone. Just...let me try."

He shook his head. "I am sorry, Miss Daae. It is not possible."

"But my cat..." She sounded pathetic.

"No. I am sorry." He left the room.

Numb, cold, and hollow, she silently ate the food sitting in the chair, still looking out over the city.

A thought popped into her head. *I'm handling this a lot better than the first time. I'm experienced, now. An experienced kidnap victim.*

The thought made her laugh and shed a few tears at the same time. Still, maybe it was true. At least she hadn't completely lost her mind. The first few days with Erik, all she had done was cry and be furious with him. Then she had ignored him. Those tactics would not work with Savino. He didn't care about her. She had to figure out something else.

Her heart thudded against her rib cage loudly a few times, and she felt her brow furrow. She was *not* going to sit here idly and wait for Erik to figure out if he wanted to pay for her or not. She wasn't going to let herself be used in this game. It wasn't her fault that Erik had stolen from Savino, and neither of them had any right to treat her the way they had. With Erik, she had gotten lucky in escaping. With Savino, she was anxious about the fact that it would require a lot more than a few tears and luck.

She spent the rest of the morning attempting to plan. The thing she came back to was those horrible dogs. If the dogs weren't there, it would be easier. She could try to pick the locks or somehow get a hold of a phone. Or...break a window? Pound on the floor and scream for help? There were probably things in the bathroom or the room with the television that she could use as weapons, but Christine didn't think she would be able to actually physically fight anyone. Maybe as a last resort or if either Savino or the dogs became violent...

Later, when she was allowed to use the bathroom again and then pick out a couple books from the room to entertain herself, she tried to look for something. The most she could see in the bathroom was a bar of soap and a towel. Savino watched her in the front room, meaning she didn't have time to investigate or really look for anything. She picked out the two heaviest books, just in case.

She heard the dogs barking excitedly some hours later, and she threw the sheets over her head and squeezed her eyes shut, praying fervently that they wouldn't come close. Thankfully, the barking didn't get any louder, and after another minute it stopped. Christine released a shuddering breath and lay down, pulling the blanket back up to her chin. She lay awake for a while longer, hoping Savino was right and that Erik had paid during the evening.

But there was nothing that evening, and so she was forced to wait yet another torturous day. She could sense Savino growing more frustrated, which terrified her.

Her sleep was restless the next night, full of things just beyond her reach and songs that she knew she had heard before but couldn't quite remember when. In a brief dream, she saw Erik, but he disappeared quickly, and she woke suddenly, disappointed and confused.

The sun was in the room, and she sat up quickly when the door opened. Savino entered to give her her breakfast, and she swallowed nervously.

"Are the...the dogs here?" she asked.

He smiled just slightly. "Yes. But in another room." He set the plate down and left.

Christine ate mechanically, shoving bread into her mouth and staring out of the window. There was no way she would try to do anything with the dogs in the apartment. But Savino had said once they were out for a walk, which meant they left the apartment *sometime*...How was she supposed to know when, though? She only saw him a handful of times throughout the day, when he delivered food and let her out to use the bathroom. Other than that, she was locked in this stupid ugly room. The door was locked every time she tested it.

Yesterday, the dogs had gone out in the morning. But this morning they were still here. They had to go out sometime during the day, right? She had a feeling that she wouldn't have many chances to do this, and so she spent a very long time sitting against the door, listening intently. She heard them barking around lunchtime, but then it grew quiet after.

Her heart was hammering in her throat, and she felt a sudden surge of fear and anxiety telling her not to do it, to simply sit there and wait, to wait another day to see if Erik paid...

But instead she stood and went to the small bedside table, picking up the lamp. It was heavy in her hands, and she felt her stomach rolling, nearly making her sick with anxiety.

With one more breath, she closed her eyes tightly and hurled the lamp at the wall. The noise wasn't as loud as she had expected, but she did still jump a little as it crashed to the ground, and she could hear the light bulb inside shattering. The she went over to the door and knocked on it frantically, calling, "Mr. de Rege? Mr. de Rege!"

It took a few moments, but she heard his footsteps approaching, and she felt her stomach leap as he opened the door.

"What?" he said, obviously irritated. He looked around and spotted the broken lamp. "What are you doing, Miss Daae?"

"I saw something over there!" she said, pointing at the far corner of the room where the lamp was. Her voice was high, tight, and panicked. "I think it was a mouse."

He looked at her, an eyebrow raised. "There are no mice here."

"But I saw it!" she said, blushing deeply. "I did! It went under the bed." She swallowed. "Can't you just—can't the...dogs come get it? Please?"

He gave a short sigh. "They are out for walking," he snapped. "And there are no mice in this apartment."

"Could you check? Please?" She crossed her arms over herself, shaking from anxiety, hoping Savino would think it was just unease because of the mouse. "I'm sorry about the lamp, but I really don't like them. Please. Just check."

Just get away from the door...go away from the door...stop blocking the door...

"Over there," she said, again pointing toward the corner by the window. "Please?"

Looking incredibly irritated now, he walked around the bed, and Christine, her heart now threatening to beat its way out of her chest, tiptoed a few steps toward the door. As soon as he bent over to glance underneath the bed, she grabbed the heaviest book from the bedside table, darted from the room, and slammed the door shut behind her.

Now feeling nauseous with terror, she clicked the lock into place and ran down the hallway. She knew she only had a few minutes at most. The lock wouldn't keep him in there like it kept her. He had his phone, he had people working for him, he might even have the key to the door in his pocket...Her hands were shaking so badly she almost dropped the book, and she held it to her chest like some sort of shield and stumbled into the room with the television, looking around wildly.

The room was empty, and she raced to a door that she had never seen behind. It was locked. Terror welled up in her throat, and she went to the next one, which was also locked. She tried one more, twisting the handle, feeling it give underneath her fingers, and she pushed it open, catching a glimpse of a large, gleaming kitchen before she felt a handful of her dress being grabbed, stopping her.

As she was yanked backward, she turned and swung the heavy book upward, her voice a strangled scream. It hit him clumsily on the chin, and there was a sudden spurt of blood. The sharp corner had dug into his skin and cut him. Savino let out a string of expletives, English and Italian mixed, and wiped at his bleeding chin, and she stood there momentarily, somehow shocked that she had actually hurt him, sickened that she had drawn blood. But she stood too long, and he dragged her back into the room.

She shakily lifted the heavy book up to hit him again, hesitant to actually do so in case she did real damage, but he was ready this time, and he grabbed it and threw it aside quickly before delivering a heavy, hard backhand that sent her crashing into the now-closed door behind her. Her vision swam, and he hit her again before she could understand what was happening. A third backhand sent her tumbling to the ground, and she lay there, too dazed and in pain to try to get up. It felt as if her sense of balance had been unhinged entirely.

Savino was still standing above her, swearing at her, but she was too stunned to fully understand what he was saying. She heard him walk a few paces away from her, and she blinked groggily at the ceiling, taking deep breaths, trying to get her head to stop spinning. It took several full minutes before she felt coherent enough to sit up, and when she did, she saw that he was sitting in the large chair in the room, holding some gauze up to his chin.

"That was not smart, Miss Daae," he then said, his voice cold, his mouth no longer curved into his usual small smile. She raised a shaking hand to her own swollen face and felt a small dribble of blood in her mouth. Her nose was bleeding.

For a very long time, they sat there. She was too dizzy and overwhelmed to try to get up, and once her head had cleared somewhat, she became too afraid to do anything. Her plan now seemed beyond stupid. She was an idiot. What had gone through her head? That because she had escaped once she could do it again? Erik had *allowed* her to escape. She knew it. It wasn't because of some brilliant plan of her own, wasn't because of her speed or strength or stamina. It was only because he let it all happen. And now it was the same with Savino. She wasn't going to get out of here through some special skill or strength of her own. And by the look on Savino's face, she had just made her situation worse.

"What do you think I must do, Miss Daae?" he then said, dabbing at his cut. "What is your plan?"

She stared, feeling helpless and worthless. What did he mean? What did he want her to say? Sorry that she had tried to escape? Sorry for hitting him?

"Still he does not pay," Savino continued. "Why?"

Sudden, unbidden tears filled her eyes, and she choked on them.

It wasn't because she had just attempted an unsuccessful escape. It wasn't because Savino had hit her three times. It wasn't even because she was in pain. The thought of Erik not paying because...he didn't care anymore caused her to cry. Had he seen the pictures and watched the video of her screams with nothing but cold indifference? Had he glanced at her and looked away with nothing but hatred for her? She felt sick at the thought.

"He sees them," Savino said. "Why does he see and not pay, Miss Daae? Why?"

She opened her mouth at last. Her jaw felt stiff, bruised already, and she whispered, "I don't...I don't know..." But maybe she did know. Maybe her steady, determined faith in Erik's continual love for her was all just wishful, hopeful thinking. Maybe she had actually been right when she said she had hurt him too much.

Savino examined her for several long moments, and she wanted him to stop. His gaze was examining, questioning, skeptical, like she was something small and ugly that he couldn't figure out how to get rid of. She wanted to go back to the bedroom and hide under the blankets.

He wiped at the cut again and glanced at the blood-stained gauze, muttering to himself in Italian, the words soft and dark. Then he gave an impatient sigh. "He does not believe me, I think," he then said. "He does not believe what I tell him."

"Believe what?" she said hoarsely, suddenly beyond terrified.

"I did not want it to come to this," he said, checking that he had stemmed the blood flow of his chin. He set the stained gauze aside. "I did not. If only he had just paid right away..."

"What do you mean?" she said, her heart racing again. "What are you...?"

He stood and rolled his sleeves up to his elbows, furrowing his brow, his lips curling into a horrible expression of anger and impatience.

"Miss Daae," he said, taking a few steps closer, his voice low and tense. "I think that our masked friend needs a little more...*incentive*."

Chapter 23: Chapter 23

Ten Months Previously

Blurred images and muffled sounds filtered through her hazy consciousness. A splash of sunshine on her face. Cool air blowing against her skin. Pressure underneath her legs and back. Her hair falling over her face and then being pulled back. A whisper in her ear, something she could not understand. Then there was nothing for a long time.

It was the music that coaxed her back into full consciousness. Clear, beautiful, and invigorating, and she listened for several long minutes, simply lying there. Her body felt heavy, her head ached, and her mouth was dry. She needed water.

The music continued to pull at her, forcing her to realize that she was in a bed. Her eyes opened then, and she looked around and saw the prison bedroom in Erik's underground apartment. Terror welled up in her throat, and she gave a croaking gasp of horror.

Instantly, the music ceased. A few seconds later the door opened, and there he stood, tall and swathed in black. His eyes pierced her.

"You are awake!" he said, his voice loud. It boomed into her skull and rattled her brain, and she gave a weak moan and closed her eyes.

"You are awake," he repeated, softer this time. "You are awake, and you are thirsty, yes?"

There was a moment of silence as he disappeared, and then he came back and stood by her. She didn't want to open her eyes and see him.

"There is water here for you, my dear. You must drink it."

She stretched out a hand, wanting him to give her the glass without having to look at him, and then she felt a long, cold arm reach under her shoulder blades to pull her up. Her eyes opened instantly. The glass of water was pressed to her lips, and she turned her head away quickly.

"No!" she managed to say, her voice hoarse. "No! No!"

There was something altogether too intimate with that, with him pouring water into her mouth. She would not have it. With a shaking hand, she reached out to grab the cup from him and clumsily brought it to her mouth. She was only able to get two gulps down before the glass slipped from her shaking fingers and spilled down her front and onto her lap, soaking her. Immediately, Erik picked it up, leaving and returning with more water, again helping her sit up. This time she let him do it, though she wrapped her fingers around the glass as well, as if he wasn't there and *she* was the one actually holding the cup without dropping it. She drank three full glasses before she began to feel slightly sick.

The water managed to clear away some of the fog in her mind, and suddenly her stomach dropped at the thought that she was here again. *Here again.* With Erik. Trapped here again. And away from Raoul.

"Where's Raoul?" she whispered, shivering slightly as a result of her wet clothing.

Erik noticed. "You must change," he said. "I have not touched anything of yours. Everything is exactly how you left it. You may wear whatever you wish." He looked at her closely and then said, his voice slightly amused, "Red does not suit you in the slightest, my dear girl." She looked up to glare at him, and he amended quickly, "No—I do not mean it to insult you. I simply wanted to say that I love you all the more in it."

"Where's Raoul?" she asked again, refusing to react to his declaration.

"Would you like to go to the front room?" Erik said. "I obtained flowers to welcome you home. I think you will like them. They are roses. You enjoy those, Christine."

"Stop."

"Or I could bring them here if you feel too unwell to leave the bed just yet." His voice was becoming tighter. "Whatever you prefer, my dear."

"Stop!"

"And yet it doesn't matter, does it? Nothing I do for you will be enough. I could give you the world, and you would not want it. You want nothing from me, is that it?"

"Stop! Stop it! Where is Raoul? Where is he, Erik?!"

"*Why don't you want the roses?!*" His voice was a roar, and she jumped, grabbing a pillow to put in front of herself, as if it would protect her from his rage.

"Why? Why, Christine? I will give you anything you want! *Anything!* Simply tell me! Tell me, and it is yours! I gave you everything you could wish for! And you were content with it until that *boy* came along and ruined everything! Ah...but Erik understands. Erik is not stupid. You prefer his perfect face. But I can give you that, Christine! I can design any mask you wish. I will give you a perfect face. Simply ask me!"

The tears were there now, and they flowed down her cheeks as she watched him.

"Ask me!" he demanded. "Ask me, and I will do it for you. Don't simply sit there and snivel like a little girl!"

"Erik, I never wanted—" she tried to whisper, but he cut her off, his voice terrible. She wanted to press her hands over her ears.

"Yet it was your choice all along! And I am honoring your choices, you see? *You* wished for it to be this way. And so I will do what you wish. I will be the monster, and you will be the sacrifice presented to me. Is that how you want to play this game? I tried to be a man for you, yet you insist on this tired trope! So very well! I will do it for you! I will be a monster!" He ripped off his mask, and Christine shuddered and looked away. To her further horror, she felt his cold hands grab her cheeks and turn her face up toward his.

"*Look at me!*" he screamed. "Look at the monster! This is what you want, is it not? I will never be anything else to you! And so I will accept your sacrifice, even if that means you will despise me for eternity!"

She was sobbing, and when he released her, she fell back on the bed, burying her face in the pillows, nearly choking on her tears. There were a few quick footsteps, and then the door slammed shut, leaving her alone in the room.

She cried until she had exhausted herself, until there felt like no more tears were left in her, until the pillow was soaked like much of the rest of the bed. Her head was pounding dully, and her eyes ached. It did not take long for her to fall asleep, already spent, her sleep deep and dreamless. When she woke again, she groaned and rubbed her eyes with her fingertips, feeling sticky and hot. She pushed her tangled hair out of her face and sat up, looking around. How long had she been sleeping? She knew that it hadn't been the wisest thing to do, but there seemed to be no other way to cope with the madness. Now she was awake again, somehow feeling more energized, somehow calmer, and a little braver than before. She looked down. The red shirt was wrinkled and stiff, and there was a water stain on the bedspread and the pillow she had sobbed into.

Her stomach was growling with hunger, and she grimaced, remembering her first few days locked in this apartment. However, she had a funny feeling that it was not going to be that way again. Something was going to happen. She had set motions into play that she had not realized, and the consequences terrified her. Erik had not told her what he had done with Raoul. Was he trapped somewhere? Was he hurt?

Taking a few deep breaths, she slid from the bed and went to the closet, flipping on the light and looking through the numerous articles of clothing, thinking hard.

Erik was not going to be reasoned with if she continued to cry and yell at him. He wouldn't listen to her if she was hysterical. He was hysterical himself. Maybe if she stayed calm and tried to actually talk with him, he would do the same. She changed out of her red shirt and into a blue one, knowing he had picked out a lot of blue for her wardrobe on purpose. After rinsing off her face and combing her hair, she tiptoed with bare, sore feet from the bedroom and peered hesitantly into the front room.

To her relief, Erik was sitting quietly, staring at a wall, appearing quite calm. He was wearing the mask again. Although she didn't let her guard down completely, knowing he could explode into a rage at any moment, it encouraged her, and she shuffled into the room a bit more, clasping her hands together.

"Erik?" she whispered. "I'm hungry."

Without a word, he stood and went to the small kitchen, pulling out an assortment of food and setting it on the table. He stepped back, and she sat down and grabbed the small bowl of strawberries.

"How long have I been sleeping?" she said.

He looked at her closely, as if deciding whether or not she was trying to trick him somehow with the question. Then he said softly, "Most of the afternoon. It is nearly eight o' clock."

Her stomach lurched at that. She had hoped it was an hour or two at most. Had she been sleeping through Raoul's pain? His imprisonment? Could she have done something more during that time that she had stupidly spent sleeping?

There was silence as she ate more strawberries and then some bread and cheese. He had never really cooked for her. Most of her food had consisted of things easily stored and quickly eaten, such as fruits, breads, pastries, and cheeses. She wondered if he even knew how to cook at all.

Giving him a nervous glance, she said, "What you said earlier...I don't...I don't think that you're a monster. I don't."

A long moment of silence followed, and he stared at her, his expression and mood indiscernible. Then he said, "Your lies are as beautiful and poisonous as you, Christine."

"I'm not lying," she said.

"Why else would you run from me? You saw my face. You wanted to escape the monster."

She nearly rolled her eyes. "I ran away because you trapped me here! You wouldn't listen to me. You wouldn't let me go anywhere."

"I took you out as often as you wished! I would have done anything for you. And yet you ran when you saw my face."

"That's not what happened," she said shortly. "Now tell me where Raoul is."

Immediately, his frame stiffened, his eyes narrowed, and his voice grew icier as he said, "Ah. Your boy. Well. I think we shall see him very soon, actually."

"What do you mean?" Her heart thudded loudly. "What are you talking about?"

"Stand up."

"What? What's going on? Where's Raoul? Erik!"

"*Stand up!*" His voice shook the walls, and she gave a frightened squeak and scrambled to her feet, shaking. He made a smooth motion with one long hand to follow him and led her to the front room. She wrapped her arms around herself and looked around, as if expecting to see Raoul tied up in the corner somewhere. But there was no one there except for her. And Erik.

He had her stand next to the small table that held a vase full of red roses, and she could feel her breath coming in little gasps, terrified. Erik stood in front of her, watching her closely. And then, to her complete and utter shock, he knelt in front of her on one knee.

"This is what you wish for, is it not?" he said. "That boy knelt in front of you, and you said yes. But you did not marry him today like you said. So I will ask you, and you will say yes to me, and we will be married today instead."

She shook her head wordlessly, helplessly as he reached into one of his pockets and pulled out a small gold ring. Grasping her left hand roughly, he pushed it onto her fourth finger, saying, "I love you more than I can comprehend. I worship the ground you walk on. I would do anything you ask. Marry me, Christine Daae."

Christine felt as if she was going to faint on the spot. Somehow, Erik knew about the whole plan. He knew exactly what happened, even the fact that Raoul had knelt in front of her. He knew everything. It had all been for nothing. She had felt so hopeful...

And now this. Now there was a ring on her finger, and now Erik was demanding that she marry him. She pressed her free hand to her forehead, sick to her stomach. What would Erik do if she refused? He would lock her up again, no doubt. Lock her up forever. But would it be different if she actually said yes? She

would be his willing prisoner if she agreed. And how could she? How could she agree to marry him after everything that had happened?

"I see that two marriage proposals in the space of nine hours is a bit too much for you," he said, noticing her silence and her shaking hand. "I will give you thirty minutes to decide. That is fair. Then you will tell me your decision. As always, it is your choice entirely."

Thirty minutes. Thirty minutes to decide. Less than an hour to figure out what to do. Blankly, she nodded, not knowing what she was supposed to say, and he rose from his knee, once again towering over her. He gazed intently at her for a few moments and then left, going into his room, leaving her alone.

Perfectly aware that it was pointless but needing to try, she went to the front door and twisted the locked handle, trying to pull it open. It didn't budge. What was she supposed to do?

For a few moments, she walked around the front room wildly, looking, bringing her hands up to her mouth and hair and then frantically pulling on her shirt. "What do I do?" she whispered to herself. "What do I do? What do I do?"

She would not be able to escape. That much was perfectly clear. No. Erik wanted his answer, and she could never be able to give it to him. Yet did her choice even matter? No matter what she said, Erik would keep her here. The only difference would be whether or not she wished for an angry, temperamental jailer or a worshipful one.

If she ever managed to escape again—married or not—she knew there was nowhere she could run to where Erik would not find her. There was nowhere to hide. A rush of anger swept over her. How could he do this to her? How could he treat her like this? How could he control her life to where it was not her life anymore? Her life was his. He dictated everything. She was his doll now. The thought sickened her.

And...there were other aspects to consider. Would Erik want to sleep with her if they married? The thought brought her to a shuddering stop, and she sank onto the couch, burying her face in the armrest, trying not to dissolve into sobs again. She had already offered to sleep with him once, only as a bargain when she had been beyond desperate. And yet he hadn't. Would that change once they married?

"Help me," she murmured weakly to no one, to nothing. She felt abandoned. Her father was not there guiding her anymore. God had left her. There was nothing. No one. And Raoul...

With a tearless sob, she pressed her hands over her face. What did Erik mean? Did that mean he was going to hurt Raoul somehow? She couldn't imagine just what he would do. Or...what if he had hurt Raoul already? No. If he had hurt Raoul, there was no way she would ever forgive him. That did not mean, however, that Erik would not force a marriage on her, no matter how much she hated him.

Her thoughts swirled around her tired, confused brain, and after a few more minutes of desperate thinking, she at last sat up and stared at the closed door for a few moments before rising and tiptoeing over to knock on it carefully. It opened mere seconds later, and Erik stepped out, closing it behind him. His gaze was intense, his eyes glowing.

"You have made your decision?" he said.

She shook her head. "I want...to know before I decide."

"What do you wish to know?"

A blush stung her cheeks, and she dropped her gaze to the floor. "What...what happens if I say yes?"

A pause. Then he replied, "We marry. And I will take you wherever you wish to go. I will give you anything. I will do anything you ask."

Her throat was tight, and her blush burned brighter, but she still mumbled quietly, "And...um. The—the wedding night?"

Another pause, this one painfully-long. She couldn't look at him, too mortified and afraid of his response.

"No," he finally said. "No, I would not ask that of you, my dear. I am not so noble as to say that I do not desire you like a man desires a woman, but I would not rape my wife. No. You would die of horror, and I cannot have that. Simply...simply permit me to be in your presence. Perhaps I will touch your hand occasionally. Your arm. Your hair. That is all I wish for."

She could have cried. Or laughed. The relief was there, but there was also, bizarrely, sadness. And gratitude. For him. For the man who was trapping her here. The feelings confused her.

"And if I say no?" she whispered, still unable to look at him.

"Then I will let you go."

Immediately, she looked up at him. "What?"

"If you do not wish to marry me, then I will not keep you here. You will be free. I will never again interfere with your life."

"But then why..." Why give her a choice at all? Surely he had to realize...realize she loved Raoul. They were going to get *married*! Why go to all the trouble to bring her back here? Only to ask her to marry him and hear her say no? As horrible as she felt, she now knew what her answer had to be. After everything Erik had done to her, she couldn't marry him, no matter what she might have felt—or *still* felt—for him.

She stood in confused, anxious silence for a few moments before a sudden, echoing *slam* reverberated through the house. Giving a frightened, surprised cry, Christine pressed her hands over her mouth, looking around quickly.

"What was that?" she whispered. "That noise. Erik? What was it?"

"Oh. Yes." He looked unperturbed, not having flinched at the sound. His gaze remained fixed on her, piercing. "There is one thing you might wish to consider before making your final decision. Come." He went over to the front door, and she watched as he unlocked it smoothly and placed a long-fingered hand on the knob.

"Are we going somewhere?" she asked blankly, her heart beginning to pound. Something did not feel right. It might all be a trick...a way to get her outside and to a priest or some official to marry them before she had a chance to protest.

"No," he said. "Come here."

She backed up a few steps, shaking her head. "You're scaring me."

"I daresay that's what happens when a *monster* traps you," he hissed, his eyes flashing. "What else is there to expect besides horror and fear?" He snapped his fingers suddenly and held out his hand. "Come here. *Now*."

Her legs shaking and her breath trembling, she approached. His frame loomed over hers, and she didn't dare raise her eyes to meet his gaze, instead staring at the floor. His black shoes were clean and long, and she was still barefoot. It was bizarre to her that a mere twenty-four hours ago, she had been with him, no hope of escaping and somehow attempting to resign herself to that fact. She had been wearing a dress and heels. They had gone out to dinner. He had seemed content to have her by his side. And now...Now it was all ruined.

"You will give me an answer," he said. "Yet before you do, I wish for you to take everything into consideration, as I have said before." He stared at her for a moment longer and then opened the front door. Nervously, she peered out into the gloom. It had always looked like a regular basement to her, a place in the apartment building to store unwanted or broken items. No doubt anyone who came down here at all assumed that Erik's door was simply yet another storage room, inaccessible to anyone except the owner.

It was chilly in the room, and she shivered slightly as she looked. Nothing caught her eye. Erik led the way over to a door. There were cleaning chemicals in that closet, she knew, having once curiously looked in it months ago. But as he put his long hand on the handle, she felt her stomach sink, knowing what was behind it, praying that she would be wrong but knowing she wouldn't be. It was opened, and there was a slightly muffled groan. Erik reached in and dragged him out. Her heart leapt as she saw—

"Raoul!" She ran over, the floor cold and dirty beneath her feet, and she knelt next to him, throwing her arms around him. He was hunched over, rubbing his eyes and groaning softly, and she hurriedly checked him over as best she could for blood.

"Raoul!" she said again. "What's wrong? Are you hurt?" He was visibly shaken and disoriented, but she couldn't see any obvious injuries.

He shook his head and rubbed the back of it. "I just...fell," he murmured. "Hit my head somehow."

The fact that he was speaking to her relieved her a little, but she still felt panicked as she watched him. They had to get out somehow. They had to get out now.

Christine looked up and gave a choking, whimpering gasp as she realized Erik was still standing beside them, staring down at Raoul with a burning, intense hatred in his eyes that she had never seen. She curled up closer to him, trying to protect him and yet somehow be protected by him from Erik's scorching gaze.

"So! We are all here at last." Erik's voice was loud, cold, and mocking. "And the boy somehow managed to follow my instructions without making a complete mess of it all. That is more than I hoped for. My compliments to you, Christine, on choosing a boy who is perhaps not a complete and utter idiot."

"Stop," she whispered. "Please."

"But he is still unarmed. I am insulted. How is he to defend you, my dear, if he has nothing with which to threaten me?"

Raoul pushed himself up to his knees, his brow furrowed in pain, and he looked at Christine before glancing up at Erik. His mouth twisted in anger at the sight, and he reached over to her hand, holding it tightly.

"You okay?" he asked. "Did he hurt you?"

"I'm fine," she said shakily. There were so many things she wanted to ask. How did he get here? What instructions was Erik talking about? Was Raoul hurt more than he was admitting to her? Had Erik somehow managed to seriously hurt him without her knowing? How long had he been trapped in that small, awful closet? She brushed his thick hair away from his forehead, still looking again for anything that might show a more serious injury.

There was still no visible blood, and with a shuddering breath, she looked back to Erik, saying, "Please, Erik. Let us out. Please."

"But you have not given me your answer, my dear." His anger was mounting; he was becoming agitated, impatient, furious.

She opened her mouth wordlessly, grabbing tightly onto Raoul's shirt. Then she whispered, "We'll go. Please. We—we'll leave the city. You don't ever have to see us again. Please. *Please*, Erik."

"That is not an answer," he hissed at her, making her want to sink more fully into Raoul's protection and strength.

She could feel sickness rising in her throat as she tried again: "I won't...I won't marry Raoul. I promise. If you let us go now, I won't marry him. I swear it."

"Give me an answer, Christine. A simple 'yes' or 'no' will suffice."

"If you let him go, I'll only sing—"

"Your answer. *Now*."

"Erik, *please*, just let us—"

"*NO!*" His scream was piercing, deafening, and he reached out to grab her, dragging her away from Raoul. Christine screamed as well, but she was pushed aside to the ground. He had snapped, she realized. He was done playing. She scrambled to her feet in time to see Erik bending over, pulling at something. Raoul's legs were kicking, his body convulsing, and she took two painful steps over, her heart trying to burst out of her chest, her throat closed and her head spinning.

To her horror, she saw something around Raoul's neck, something that Erik was holding—that he was twisting, tightening. Raoul grabbed at it, unable to get it loose, his face already turning red, and Erik put a foot on his chest, holding him in place, the thin, red rope taut in his long hands. Christine gave a despairing, terrified sob.

"Stop!" she cried. "Erik, stop! No!"

"You will give me your answer!" he bellowed. "Tell me yes, and your boy continues to breathe. Tell me no, and I will release you, but *he* will be condemned to remain here and rot until his face resembles Erik's!"

Raoul gave a choking, breathless gasp, obviously unaware of just what was happening around him. His eyes were shut tight, his hands scrabbling at the rope around his neck. His legs had stopped moving, but he continued to try to pull away from Erik's grasp. Christine could see a line of blood racing down his neck and onto the floor.

"Why are you doing this?!" she sobbed. "Erik, stop! Stop!" He twitched, pulling on the rope tighter, and Raoul gave a muted, guttural grunt as his face turned a deeper shade of red, his eyes shut and his body going limp. "You're killing him!" Christine screamed, tears streaming down her cheeks. "*Please!*"

"Simply say it, Christine," he said. "Say that you will come with me, away from here. Say that you will marry me.

"Erik, please..." She fell to her knees beside him, grabbing onto his jacket. "Please! Don't do this!" With desperation rising, she yanked on the jacket, trying to make him stumble, to fall down and away from Raoul. He felt completely immovable, even when she wrapped her arms around his and pulled desperately, uselessly.

"Please," she whispered again. "Please, I'm begging you!"

A long, horrid pause followed. Then his voice came, hissing, cold, "Give me your answer."

She choked, pressing her hands over her face. He was not going to yield.

There was no way out.

For a few seconds, there was a bizarre silence, and in those seconds, Christine felt everything shatter. Inside of her, around her, the connection she had felt with him...It was all broken, and she lifted her gaze to look, to see if he could feel it as well.

But somehow, she was able to see. Maybe it was because everything was broken, and there was nothing left to obscure her vision anymore. She could see it all now. His terror. His anger. His hurt. His desperation. It raced through him and into her, and she gave a shuddering gasp as it filled her up and blinded her momentarily. Then she could see her own fears. Her own hurt. Her own yearnings.

There was nothing to be done, yet Christine felt a warm flare of emotion inside of her, urging her onward when everything else was telling her to shut down, to give up, to let him win. Somehow, she could see it all clearly, a burst of inspiration that struck her so quickly, so completely that her tears stopped altogether, and her legs stopped shaking enough for her to stand.

She met his gaze, feeling no hatred, no terror anymore. Erik stared back, and she could see his eyes widen just a bit behind the mask as he saw her. There was a flicker of something—perhaps fear—as she took a step closer to him.

With sure, steady hands, she reached over and grasped his, pulling the rope from his fingers and letting it drop to the ground. And he let her. Somehow he understood, somehow he realized the importance of her actions and allowed her to continue as she pulled him a few steps away from Raoul.

There was no hurry, nothing hidden, no revulsion as she slid off his gloves and brought one of his cold hands up, pressing it against her cheek and closing her eyes. He released a shuddering, harsh breath, and Christine opened her eyes again, softly smiling. She felt inexplicably calm.

"It's all right," she murmured, speaking to both Erik and herself. "It's fine now. We're fine. I understand now."

He brushed a long thumb along her cheekbone. "I would give you anything," he whispered, his voice shaking, strained. "Anything you wished for."

"I know." And yet that promise to her was unimportant. She didn't care about it, but she didn't know how to convey that feeling just yet. He didn't have to give her anything. He didn't have to bribe her or force her or threaten her to stay. He only had to offer himself. That was enough now. The knowledge of the power she had in this moment threatened to overwhelm her, but she pushed it back, instead choosing to focus on the man before her.

She stepped even closer and reached up to grasp the bottom of his mask. His eyes flashed in warning, but he did nothing to stop her as she carefully pulled it off, exposing his ruined face. In that moment, there was no part of her that was repulsed at the sight. She simply looked. His hand was shaking against her cheek, and he tried to pull away, but she caught it in her own, entwining their fingers and resting their joined hands near her heart. It was steady. She could feel it, warm and encouraging, and it flowed through them both.

"We'll go," she said quietly. "Tonight. Wherever you want, Erik. I'll marry you."

A stunned silence settled over him for a few moments. His hand twitched against her heart, but she held firmly, gently. His mouth parted slightly, shapeless lips and thin, dry skin. His eyes were burning with questions, confusion, fears, and Christine, somehow knowing just how to answer and assuage, leaned up. She gave him enough time to understand and turn away, yet he did not, and with a soul that seemed to reach out and connect with his own, she pressed her lips to his.

Something crashed through both of them. She felt it racing through her, filling her up, yet she did not know what it was. Her entire being seemed to shift, away from what she had always known and into somewhere new, a place where only they existed, where the only thing she understood was that she was there, with him, his hands in hers and his lips trembling and still against her own. He was not returning her kiss, yet at that moment, he had no need to. She understood.

With a soft breath, she broke away and rested her head on his bony chest, wrapping her arms around him. His heartbeat was loud against her ear, wild and racing. His hands carefully brushed over her sides and snaked around her, a return of an embrace she knew was altering them in incomprehensible ways with each second passing. His ribcage was hard against her cheek, and his short, panting breaths were ruffling her hair.

After another moment she felt, with icy dread, the beginnings of his retreat. She could sense his walls returning. He was going to hide again so he wouldn't have to confront her honesty or what had just transpired between them. He was afraid, and his hands began to slide from her back.

Pulling back, she looked up at him again, forcing him to pause, to look at her, to *look* at her. He stared, and she, with an exhilarating swoop in her stomach, leaned up to kiss him once again.

His long hands tightly clenched her shirt, and he at last reciprocated, his walls crashing. He was inelegant and clumsy with the kiss, yet that made it all the more meaningful. His lips were cool, his mouth hot and somehow not at all what she expected yet so much more. She said everything with that kiss, and she knew that he understood. Everything that needed to be said between them was said. Her heart beat with an intensity and excitement that she had never felt before, his own emotions palpable with his trembling lips, gasping breaths, and shaking hands.

Something wet dripped onto her cheek, and after another moment, he pulled away abruptly. She saw his tears for only a split-second before he pressed his long

fingers over his eyes and turned away from her, breathing deeply, raggedly. His thin shoulders rose up and down, and she could see that his entire frame was shaking.

Several seconds of silence lasted an eternity, and Christine stood there, one hand on her throat, the other covering her mouth, her lips warm and infused with that tingling feeling that always accompanied a kiss. She knew she was not supposed to speak now. She wanted to take the steps over and embrace him again, but she sensed that he did not want that.

After another minute of stunned, overwhelming silence, he turned, staring at her, no longer crying openly, yet his eyes were still shining with tears. She looked back at him and somehow, incredibly, managed to smile, a blush blooming on her cheeks.

He let out a noise that sounded like a mixture of a laugh and a pained groan, and he bent over. The rope slipped off of Raoul's neck, disappearing in his hands. Christine blinked, her throat burning. Erik took Raoul's wrist and held it for a few moments, closing his eyes briefly as if in pain himself. Then he stood and said, his voice low, flat:

"He will live. I will ensure that he has proper medical care."

Christine released a small sigh, her smile growing just a bit. "Thank you. That means so much to me." She took a step closer to him, and he stepped away from her, shaking his head. She paused, confused.

"Should I...pack now?" she said.

"There will be no need for that," he said.

She frowned slightly but did not want to push him or upset him. "Okay. We can just go, then."

"It is time," he said softly.

Still confused, she nevertheless nodded and replied, "Yes. Time to get married."

"No. It is time. It is time for this to be over."

"What?"

"It is over, Christine," he said. "Your sacrifice has been accepted by the monster."

"Erik, don't say—"

"You must marry him," he interrupted her, looking to Raoul, whose breathing was shallow but steady, his eyes closed. Christine felt her heart skip a few painful beats at the sight, but she forced herself to look back to Erik, whose unmasked face was impassive and horrible.

"What are you doing?" she whispered. "I don't understand..." She tried to go over and grasp his hand, but after only a moment, he stepped back, pulling his hand away from hers, and she felt a gentle tug on her left hand that signified he had pulled off the ring. It disappeared between his long fingers.

"I have told you. It is over. You are free."

Something seemed to crash into her, and she took a step backward as if physically impacted by the weight of it. "But I said I'd go with you!" she said, feeling her head spin. "I told you I would marry you!"

"No," he said. "It is...No. You must leave with him. And you will never see me again, I promise you."

"But..." She felt sick and drained, and she began to tremble. The emotions of the night fell on her in a wave that made her eyes fill up with tears. She watched silently as Erik bent down to pick up his mask and tie it back on. Her body felt as if there was no solid ground underneath her feet, and she swayed so much that she had to sit down in order to avoid falling over. Raoul's body was still warm next to her, and she could hear his breathing.

"He will live," Erik repeated. "He will live, and you will marry him and be happy. That is all I wish for. Your happiness."

"But..." It seemed to be the only thing she was able to say. Her throat was closed, her head still spinning and her heart pounding, everything still pumping from what had just happened and yet starting to shut down simultaneously. She put a hand to her forehead, trying to sort it all out. Erik wanted her to marry him. She was going to marry him. She had agreed to do so. And now...they weren't? Now what? A few tears dripped down her cheeks. Somehow...the thought of marrying him didn't seem as horrible as it had only fifteen minutes ago. Now she...she would have done so willingly. *Gladly?*

She looked up at him again and found that he was staring at her with an unreadable, deep, soul-exposing expression. His eyes were bottomless. She felt she was drowning in them.

He said softly, "Long is the way and hard, that out of Hell leads up to light."

"Erik," she murmured.

And then he was gone. She gave a little shuddering gasp. It felt as if he took something with her, some physical part of herself that she didn't know she had. Her head and heart were pounding, and she lay down on the cold stone floor beside him, tears running into her hair. Emotions she couldn't understand began to sweep over her and suddenly, she sat up and looked around. He was gone, and she was alone with Raoul.

"Erik?" she whispered. "Erik." Her legs shaking, she climbed to her feet and tottered over to his door. It was locked, and she pulled on it and slapped it. "Erik? Erik! Where are you? Come back! Please! Come back!"

He was not there. He had left, and she hadn't gone with him, hadn't even stopped him. After tugging uselessly on the door for another few moments, she went back to Raoul and knelt down, some of her tears splashing onto his rumpled, dirty shirt. His neck looked horrific, but his chest continued to rise and fall, and Christine lay back down beside him and sobbed, unable to understand, unable to do anything but cry.

It was only when someone put a hand on her shoulder that she realized the basement was becoming flooded with people and lights. She felt herself being jostled, and an urgent voice was saying loudly, "Miss? Miss, can you hear me?"

She wanted to tell them to leave her alone. With supreme effort, she looked over and saw a medical team surrounding Raoul, and the tears started again. How could she have let him become mixed up in this whole thing?

"It's all right, Miss," the unknown voice said, putting a warm hand on her forehead. "You're safe now. It's all right."

But was it? As she felt herself being lifted up and carried from the basement, Christine wasn't sure that she knew. And with a sickening, sinking feeling in her stomach, she saw, through half-lidded, tear-filled eyes, the basement slip away and a warm, clear, noisy night greet her.

Chapter 24: Chapter 24

In response to some of the questions asked in earlier reviews, Christine's fear of dogs is mentioned in chapter sixteen. Of course I don't expect everyone to remember every detail mentioned in the story, but if you're still wondering why she panics around them, there's the answer. Thank you all so much for the reviews! They have been so insightful, encouraging, and helpful. I don't say it nearly often enough, but I am really grateful for them. I hope you enjoy this chapter!

She could remember being fifteen. Sitting in a cold high school classroom, her underpaid, overworked teacher smiled tiredly at the students from the front of the room.

"I want you all to take out a piece of paper," the teacher said. "Write a few sentences about where you see yourselves in five years—some goals you want to accomplish during that time. They don't have to be big, but they have to mean something to you, okay?"

There was a general groan of displeasure from the students, probably most of whom thought the assignment too juvenile for high school. Christine pulled out a blank sheet of paper and tapped on it with the end of her pencil, her mind oddly blank. The students around her were writing busily, most looking bored and obviously just writing things to get the assignment done. The girl next to Christine looked thoughtful, however, and Christine glanced over, hoping for some inspiration. She was not a cheater, and she wouldn't want to copy verbatim, but maybe a few ideas would help.

The girl next to her had written in short, squat letters: *In five years, I'll be married and have my cosmetology degree. I'll be opening my own salon, and we'll have a baby. I'll have run two marathons and—*

Christine looked away quickly from the paper. None of that sounded really appealing to her. Not that cosmetology school and running marathons weren't worthwhile goals, but she couldn't imagine herself doing either. Ever. She *wanted* to write down something about music. Doing something with music. But what? She was afraid that her teacher would read it and tell her that that was unrealistic. Music was not a reliable course of study. It wasn't guaranteed to lead to employment. Of course, her father had found steady work as a musician, but that was only because he was extremely talented and could play several instruments. He was versatile and therefore useful. She could only sing and play the guitar, and she wasn't particularly talented at either.

She stared at her paper for a while longer until the teacher announced that they had a minute left, and Christine jumped and hastily scribbled:

In five years, I'll be twenty years old. I'll be working on my college degree. I'll have my own apartment.

She handed it in, feeling uneasy, and she remained unsettled the rest of the day. As she left school, still troubled, she was surprised to see her father's old white car parked near the entrance. He rolled the window down and honked at her, waving and smiling, and she hurried over.

"Dad! What are you doing here?"

"Picking you up," he said, still grinning. "Get in. Have you had lunch yet? I'm starving."

She slid into the car. "They feed us lunch at school, Dad. And aren't you supposed to be working right now?"

"Oh." He waved his hand dismissively. "I got off early for a doctor's appointment. Just a regular check-up. And I decided to surprise you! What do you want to eat?"

"I had lunch already." She looked over at him as he drove. "Did you tell the doctor about how your chest hurts sometimes?"

"They're going to run some tests." He wasn't looking at her. "He said it wouldn't be anything serious. I should just probably stop eating so much sugar. Now—lunch. How about that place by the park? The one that has those ice cream sundaes you like. We'll share one."

They went there, and Christine ate a second lunch and felt sick. After their plates were taken away and the large ice cream sundae was put in front of them, her father asked, "You okay, sweetheart? You look sad."

Christine glanced up, blushing a little. She sat for a few moments, trying to decide what would be better to tell him. Finally, she told him about the assignment for school and how she had had no idea what to write down.

"I don't know what I want to do," she said, playing with the melting ice cream. "I have no idea, Dad. What should I do?"

He actually chuckled a little, and that annoyed her. Wasn't he taking this seriously? This was her *life*. It wasn't a joke. Then he said, "You're fifteen, sweetheart. Still young. You have plenty of time to figure it out, okay? And what you want changes as you grow up and have different experiences. We all want different things at different times in our lives." He gave her a wide, wonderful smile. "I know you'll figure it out, and whatever you do will be amazing. Whatever you do is going to be extraordinary, Christine. I know it."

Extraordinary. That was the word he had used.

Was *this* extraordinary? Was she extraordinary? More than five years later, lying on the hard floor, alone, in pain?

The pain. Whenever she thought of it, it seemed to increase and encase her in an unbearable way. It throbbed through her, and more tears fell. There was no way to escape it. She couldn't sleep because of it, and she couldn't move. She was forced to simply lie there, unmeasured time slipping by. The only thing she had done was turn her head to the side so that the blood wouldn't drip down the back of her throat. Her lip was split badly, and she had accidentally bitten her tongue. Her mouth was coated in a disgusting, metallic taste that wouldn't go away.

She kept her eyes closed, her body still. There was no way she could allow herself to move or feel or think anymore. She couldn't think of herself as *extraordinary*. She could only breathe and try to keep her mind empty. Keep the thoughts away.

The thought that she would be here forever.

The thought that he had not come for her. Would not come for her.

The thought that she would never see him again and never find the answers she had spent so long looking for.

A few more tears dripped out of the corners of her eyes, sliding down into her hair. She opened her eyes, staring at the white ceiling. Very faintly, she could hear the traffic from the streets below. A police siren was wailing. But it was not going to come for her. No one was. The sunlight in the room hadn't even reached her. She was lying in the shadows, cold and in pain.

Christine could remember being hit only twice before this. Once had been by her father when she was six. She had snuck into his bedroom while he was showering and had played with his guitar, snapping several strings in the process. When her father had come back and seen the expensive strings curled up uselessly against the instrument, he had pulled her up and had given her a very solid, very painful spank. However, her tears and blubbering six year-old apologies had had an instant effect. He had taken her out for ice cream and had let her eat as much as she wanted.

The other time had been with Madeleine. The slap had been sharp and effective, and her cheek had been red for a few days following, a reminder of the woman's anger and threats.

But this...this had been different.

She had fought back at the beginning, had clawed and slapped and kicked whatever she could reach, but a sudden, intense blow to her ribs left her winded, and she choked, her vision swimming at the pain in her ribs and the lack of air. There was pressure by her, and she realized that Savino was beside her on the ground.

To her dazed horror, she felt his hand slide between her thighs.

"This can be much worse," he had said, his voice soft. "I can do more than only hit you." His hand tightened, and she gave a gasping sob, shutting her eyes and wishing she was somewhere—*anywhere*—other than here. There was a long pause, and she could feel tears streaming out of her eyes.

"Do you want that?" he then asked quietly.

She shook her head quickly, immediately. "Please...d-don't..." she whispered.

"No? Then you will be quiet and not fight. If you do not obey, it will be worse. Do you understand?"

With a sob, she had nodded her head, because what else was she to do?

She had attempted to cover her face to protect it, but that had merely caused a few of her fingers to be injured, and she was sick at the thought that they might be broken. For a few moments, she had tried to drift away from it all, to mentally remove herself, but memories of *him* immediately swam to the surface, and they felt more painful than being present, because *he* was not coming for her, and *he* did not care what Savino did to her.

She couldn't tell how long it had lasted, but then it was over. He had moved her to the bedroom and had unceremoniously left her on the floor, shutting the door loudly behind him and locking it. He hadn't come back since.

She continued to lie there, riding waves of intense pain as her body seemed to at last identify the worst spots. Her hand was throbbing. It was too painful to breathe deeply, and she could feel warm blood around her mouth and chin. For some time, she waited in terrified anticipation of Savino returning and doing worse things to her, yet she wasn't able to get up to try to do anything about it. She simply waited, breathing, hoping to pass out and yet in too much pain to do so. Maybe the next time he would let the dogs do the work.

The thought caused a shuddering, pitiful cry to well up in her throat. It came out as a weak sigh, and as she did so, blood slid back down her throat. Immediately, she coughed at the sensation, but that act caused her ribcage to seize up in pain, and so she convulsed on the floor, spitting up the blood and nearly vomiting because of the pain in her ribs. Her face was covered in fluids, but when she raised a trembling hand to wipe it off, her fingers seized up and her face felt too tender to touch. She cried softly, unable to fully sob because of how much it would hurt.

She was ashamed. This was exactly what she had wanted to prevent. She had not wanted to have to be saved. She had wanted to save herself, yet in the end she felt as useless and weak as she had that night all those months ago. No matter what she did, she had to be saved. She had tried...tried to save herself but had needed Raoul to save her. And she had not saved herself this time. She had only managed to get herself in this situation because of her lack of common sense and the fact that she could not let go of the past. And unlike before, no one was coming to save her.

She had felt this way after her father's death. The first year of college had felt as if she had been drowning with nothing to cling onto, nowhere to go. Meg had been instrumental in keeping her afloat during those months, yet it had only been through music and the prospect of training in New York that she had finally found a way to swim.

Thinking of her father caused her tears to begin anew, and she would have sobbed had she been able to. Where was he now? Had he honestly led her here, to this floor of this apartment? No...she didn't believe that. Perhaps she had ignored his direction and guidance. Maybe she had blindly run into this herself, not paying any attention to signs that would have pointed her to a different direction. Her father would have led her to freedom, to peace, to safety...to more music.

And yet, hadn't she believed that he had led her to Erik in the first place? She had literally cried with happiness after her first lesson with Erik, *knowing* then that that was where she was supposed to be. She had felt closer to her father than ever before, feeling that he was guiding her to where her destiny was. Even Erik had said so, and at the time she had believed him.

Those first few weeks with him...She had never been happier since her father's death. She had admired her tall, graceful, genius instructor. She had soaked in his teachings, happy to spend her days with him. She wanted to be taught, and she wanted to learn.

And then...the concert. It had happened a week before running into Raoul again. She had been beyond nervous when he had told her what he had arranged, but through practice and his constant reassurances, she was ready.

The theater had been small, and there were a few other performers there, mainly instrumental. She was singing three songs, and she was directed over to the wings by the short stage manager, not knowing where exactly Erik was but knowing that he was somewhere and was listening. The woman who was performing before her played the cello well, but Christine felt her gaze and focus momentarily drift away, and she looked upward into the dark ceiling. She smiled and swallowed back a few overwhelmed tears. *Thank you, Dad.*

When it was time, she stood center stage and sang. Months later, she could still remember that rush of adrenaline and pure joy pulsing through her, lifting her up, somehow taking her soul out of her body and exposing it. To Erik. At that moment, she had felt no embarrassment. There was only total, complete trust in him and in herself. She had never felt more confident, strong, and sure. And just as Erik had predicted, she was the stand-out performance of the evening. Everything had been perfect.

Afterward, flushed, blushing, and smiling widely, she had met him behind the theater, the late May evening warm on her arms and legs. Caught up in the moment and still slightly light-headed from all that had happened, she leaned over and hugged him, firmly but briefly. He took a quick breath of surprise but made no move to return the momentary embrace.

"That was the most amazing thing I've ever done!" she said. "That was...that's...I can't even describe how I feel!"

He gave a wry smile. "That is why music exists."

She laughed and nodded. "I feel like I can do anything! This is...I've never been happier. And it's only thanks to you, Erik."

She hadn't lied or misspoken. It was all thanks to him. The concert, the success, the audience, the *music*...

There was a long minute of silence then. He watched her, his eyes boring into hers, yet for once, she felt no need to look away. She simply met his gaze, silent, questioning, answering. Her mouth parted a few times, as though wanting to say something, and yet nothing was said. Nothing needed to be said at this moment. The music had said more than enough, and she took an unconscious step closer, her heart pounding, her breathing soft. She had wished for his mask to be off then. She thought that it was preventing her from doing what she wanted to do at that moment.

"Will you come to dinner with me?"

Christine blinked in surprise, having drifted a bit. "Dinner?" she repeated, slightly thrown off by how...normal the question sounded. Like he was a normal man asking her out to dinner.

He seemed slightly nervous as he nodded and softly said, "Yes. Dinner. With Erik."

Her smile returned. "Yes. I would love to."

It hurt to think about that evening. The conversation had come so easily, and during the night Christine caught herself several times thinking of how normal it all was...like they were any other couple out for a late dinner date. She couldn't, however, completely ignore the fact that he wore a mask and they were in a private booth at an expensive restaurant. Still...she had smiled at him, laughed, conversed willingly and happily with him that night.

And now...now she knew the truth. He could not recover, and neither could she. The hurt ran too deeply. He was not going to come. No one was.

She had no idea how long her injuries would take to heal. It all depended on how severe they were, and she didn't know how to tell. Judging by the pain, they would be bad enough to keep her in bed for a few days at least, but what if there were internal injuries as well? The thought frightened her.

The sun was disappearing, and the room was becoming darker. She could see some light creeping in underneath the door, but it was dim, and the apartment was silent. That was how it was going to be now. She was going to be forgotten about, left here in this room forever, silent and in pain. Savino would probably find other ways of getting Erik to pay back the money. And no one would miss her. They would easily find someone to replace her at her job, and her cat would be given back to the shelter, maybe even put down. *Poor kitty. And she had never named it, either.*

It was only sometime later that she managed to slip off into a doze, her exhaustion outweighing the ache in her body. She drifted in and out of consciousness, and it began to blend together. For a moment, she was convinced that her father was in the room with her, and she woke instantly, eyes darting around to see nothing but the bed and the chair.

Dad, why did you leave? Why did I push you away? Why do I push away everyone I love?

More tears dripped out of her eyes and pooled in her ears. Her body hurt from being on the floor in one position for so long, yet it hurt much worse to try to move it. Simply lying still was the best way to alleviate the pain, though it continued to pulse through her in dull waves.

The door shutting caused her to jump, and she looked to see that Savino was in the room. Her chest tightened, her eyes widened, and she instinctively and painfully threw her hands over her face to protect herself.

"I am only bringing you food," he said. She could hear him putting a plate on the bedside table. "I do not want to be cruel, but you bruise very nicely, you know, Miss Daae. I am only disappointed that you are still here. And now there is the question of what to do with you."

She wanted to beg him to let her go, to swear that she wouldn't tell another soul what had happened, to promise that she would leave and disappear and never step foot in New York again, but she kept silent, knowing it would all be pointless.

He lightly rubbed the cut on his chin. "Maybe I will sleep to decide. That is a saying, yes? To sleep for the answer. Maybe he will pay tonight. But I do not think so anymore. If he has not paid yet, I do not think there is anything else to do. But maybe you really are as average and unextraordinary as you told to me. And it would not be wise to announce your murder in case somehow the police see it. So I must spend tonight deciding what to do." He bent down and ran a hand over her swollen cheek. "Goodnight, Miss Daae." And he left.

Sickness was rising in her throat, and she kept it down as best she could, closing her eyes, trying to keep herself calm. *He would let her go tomorrow. He would.* Erik wasn't coming for her, and Savino had said earlier that he wouldn't keep her here forever, so he had to release her. And...and she would go back to her apartment...and everything would be normal again...

Christine wanted to die. At that time, in that moment, on the floor, knowing she was utterly alone and that the man she was afraid she loved was not coming to save her, she didn't want to think of it all anymore. The pain was too much for her. More tears filled her eyes, but they dried after only a few moments. A sort of hollow numbness swept over her. Her mind went blank, and her heartbeat slowed.

She drifted off into a vague form of sleep again, the physical pain somehow keeping her partly conscious and yet the majority of her mind unconscious. Memories seemed to blend together with fantasies and fears. Erik drifted in and out, sometimes masked, other times with his face bare. In some dreams she ran to him; in others she ran away from him.

Then she dreamed of *that night*. That kiss. Warm, terrified, desperate, comforting, reassuring. It had been everything to the both of them.

A sharp noise caused her to jump, and then there was another, and after a third time she realized it was a dog barking.

The sound pulled her back into full consciousness, and she gasped and then groaned because of the hot ache in her side. She lay there, staring at the door, her

heart beginning to pound loudly.

A dog barked again, causing her to flinch. Was Savino going to let them into the bedroom, as she had feared? Was he so angry that everyone had abandoned her that he was going to let the dogs rip her up? Nearly frantic, she tried to scoot away from the door, hoping to maybe slide under the bed and make it harder for the dogs to get to her. Every inch was torture, yet the thought of those dogs' bared teeth was enough to make her grit her teeth and endure the few minutes of excruciating pain as she managed to push herself under the bed. It was a little dusty, but she couldn't have cared less. At least now she wasn't simply lying there in the middle of the floor, waiting to be ripped apart by Savino's horrible dogs.

The second one was barking now, loudly, and she squeezed her eyes shut, her breath coming in short gasps. She was waiting for the door to be opened, yet the dogs simply continued to bark. It went on for what felt like several minutes, and she suddenly heard Savino snap at them, his Italian loud and curt. The dogs ignored him and continued to bark, and then they began to growl. It sounded more terrifying than their barking, and Christine could not open her eyes, as though the dogs would be right next to her if she did so, even though she knew they were somewhere else in the apartment.

Another sharp, loud command came from Savino, and the dogs actually quieted for several minutes. Christine felt herself relax just a bit but then instantly tensed when they began to growl again, louder and more agitated, barking occasionally, deep and threatening.

Her lips were moving, though no sound escaped. *Please, please, please, please...*

To her shock, the dogs suddenly both gave a loud whimper and were silent. She released a short exhale of relief, hoping that it meant that Savino had somehow managed to calm them and that they weren't about to burst into her room and drag her out from underneath the bed.

A door slammed, causing her to flinch again, and then, to her further surprise, a sudden scream. Another door shut, and Christine was again grateful that she was under the bed. There was no way to know what was happening, but at least she felt somewhat protected should anything try to enter the bedroom for her.

The silence that followed was eerie. She lay there, waiting and listening, trying to figure out just what was going on but afraid that it would be something bad. Another door opened and slammed shut. There was a loud crash, causing her to gasp slightly. After three seconds of what felt like eternal silence, a roar was heard throughout the apartment, shaking the walls, rattling the windows.

"WHERE IS SHE?"

The emotions that flooded through her caused her to begin sobbing, uncaring that it felt like a stab in her side with each breath. She knew that voice, and she knew who it was, and she knew that he was here.

He had come for her.

She swallowed back a sob and tried to call out to him. "Erik...! Erik!" Her voice cracked and felt like a hoarse whisper, but she tried again. "Erik!"

Yet he was still shouting, a mixture of Italian and English, and it sounded like something heavy and fragile had been pushed over. Another door slammed, and there was a sharp shout of pain that sounded like Savino. More things were breaking, and she waited in tearful, breathless anticipation.

He had come for her.

He was here, so close, closer than he had been in nearly a year. The man who had done so much for her. The man who had done so much to her. She continued to cry in a bizarre mixture of relief, fear, anticipation, and delight. There was nothing she could do about it now. She was going to see him, and though she had told herself that she never wanted to do so again, her entire being seemed to strain towards him, willing him to find her. *I feel the link of Nature draw me...*

Another crash came, this one closer, and her heart leapt. Erik's voice was clearer now, though he was speaking only Italian at this point, and yet merely hearing him was a comfort. Savino was not going to touch her again.

They were in the hallway. Erik was still screaming, irate, uncontrolled, and although the sound brought back horrible memories, she pushed them aside. This was now salvation, not damnation.

There was a loud thud and another grunt of pain from Savino, and then...then the door was opened.

A long silence followed, and she heard footsteps in the room. Light, calculated, careful. *He was there.* And neither spoke. It was as if neither wanted to admit that they were there, that they had come back to each other after months of running away. But finally, a word.

"Christine?"

Dozens of questions seemed to be swept away by that one word. She managed to bring her uninjured hand up over her sore mouth to try to stifle a loud sob, and instead she took a deep breath and whispered, "Erik?"

In an instant, there was a rustle, and in the darkness of the room she could see him kneeling down to look under the bed. His glowing eyes were there, and they met hers. More questions felt answered. There was a look of pain, of regret, of anger and of desperation. And that was Erik. He stared at her as if she were some exotic creature, fascinated and questioning at the same time.

Then he whispered, his voice just as hoarse as hers, "Do not scream. Please. Do not be afraid. I will not hurt you."

She didn't have the stamina to explain anything at that moment. Instead she reached out to him with her uninjured hand and simply said, "You're here."

After another moment, he reached for her, grabbing her and pulling her closer and out from underneath the bed, wrapping a long hand around her side, but the pain was excruciating. She cried out and pushed his hand away, tears springing to her eyes as her ribs protested intensely from the momentary pressure. "Ah! Stop! Please—!"

A long pause, and she breathed carefully, her vision swimming momentarily. "My ribs..." was all she managed to say, her voice shaking. He moved his hands to her arms, and there were a few seconds of pain as he pulled, but then it was all over, and she was out from underneath the bed, staring up at him. He stared back, his eyes wide, as if unbelieving that she was there.

"You should not...not on this floor," he rasped.

His long arms slipped under her, and she gave a shrill cry as he picked her up swiftly and set her on the nearby chair. It felt like heaven against her bruised, beaten

body. He stood over her, the dim light of the small room making it hard for her to see him completely, but his glowing eyes were fixed on her. She felt something brush up against her cheek, and she realized that it was his fingers. He was not touching *her*, though. He was touching the dried blood on her face. His eyes dimmed, and she watched in slight fear as he straightened himself to his full height and then looked at the door. Before she could try to ask, he was out of the room in two long strides. There was a dull thud, and she wanted to shriek when she saw Savino being dragged into the room. Erik had a painful-looking grip on him, one hand grabbing a fistful of his hair and the other twisting his arm behind his back.

Even in the poor light, Christine could see that Savino looked just as badly as she probably did. There was blood smeared around his mouth, his clothing was ripped in some places, and he was limping heavily. She had no idea why Erik was bringing him in here...why he was making Savino come even *closer* to her. With a sharp jerk, he forced Savino to his knees right in front of her chair, and she wanted to curl up and hide her face from him, still humiliated beyond belief.

"Look at her!" Erik then hissed, his voice causing her to shiver. "Look at her, you disgusting Italian pig! Were you stupid enough not to realize what I would do to you if you ever touched her? If you so much as glanced her way? It seems you have a death wish that I am only too happy to grant!"

Savino looked up at her and said something in harsh Italian before spitting directly onto her face.

With a scream of anger, Erik immediately pulled him back and around, delivering a blow so hard that Savino was knocked back onto the floor and didn't stir. Erik knelt next to her and pulled out a handkerchief, which he used to carefully wipe off her face. The dried blood wouldn't come off without scrubbing at it with some soap, but he at least cleaned off Savino's mixture of fresh blood and saliva, and she shuddered as he finished. He used one long finger to gently pull at her lower lip, looking closely.

"Split in two places," he murmured, maybe more to himself than to her. "Yet too early to..."

"Erik," she whispered, her eyes filling with fresh tears. The realization was finally setting in. "You came for me."

He looked up at her, his eyes still angry. "You think I would not? That I would allow you to remain here one moment longer with *that*?" He gave a contemptuous glance to the unconscious figure of Savino on the floor.

"I didn't—I thought that you..." She was stumbling over her words, her injured mouth and emotional turmoil all making it difficult for her to speak quickly.

"No," he interrupted. "Not now. I must take you from this place." He then said, lapsing back into the slightly-panicked voice from earlier, "You have no need to fear me. I swear. I will not..." He struggled with how to proceed. "I will not do as I did...before. I am going to ensure you receive proper medical attention, and that is all. I swear to you."

Christine wanted to respond and tell him that that was not what she was afraid of at that moment, but attempting to do so would invite an entire conversation that she felt too weak to have at this moment. And she didn't want to have it with Savino lying unconscious beside them.

Erik paused and then said softly, hesitantly, "It will be best for you to be sedated for now. You may say no, of course. But it might be extremely painful to try to move anywhere while conscious."

No matter how much she wanted to be awake—*he* was there, beside her—she knew he was right, and the thought of being conscious while trying to move her bruised body out of this apartment was too daunting. So she nodded.

"That's...that's fine," she said softly. "I understand."

He disappeared briefly and reappeared with a small black bag, which he dug through for a few moments. Christine watched him before looking back over at Savino, who was lying there unconscious but still breathing.

"He was...so nice at first," she whispered. "I never thought he would..."

Erik glanced up to see what she was looking at and then scoffed. "He is a vile, cowardly snake. And you will never see him again."

There was gentle pressure at her side as Erik carefully took her arm, turning it over for the needle. With a quick breath that burned at her sides, she suddenly said, "Wait!"

"What?" Erik said immediately, looking at her. "What is it?"

"You have to promise," she said, her voice still hoarse and dry. "You have to."

"Promise what, exactly?"

"You—you have to be there. You can't leave." She watched him, his eyes searching, confused, still bordering on rage, and she sensed the urgency of this moment.

"I am not leaving," he said. "I am going to ensure that you are safe."

"But after. You have to be there after. You can't leave. You need to be there when I wake up."

His voice was tight, high, angry. "What? *Why*? Why would you want that?"

No. There was still no way to explain it all to him right now. There was not enough energy, enough strength at that moment. She simply needed him to stay. That was what she needed to hear.

"Please," she said softly. "I'm so tired. Please. Just promise me. And then...then we'll talk. When you're there."

He still looked confused, angry, and alarmed. "Were you injected with something?" he demanded. "What did that pig give to you? Is your mind injured as well? Tell me what he did to you."

Tears were welling up in her eyes, and he looked horrified by them.

"Erik," she whispered. "Please...just..."

"Fine. *Fine*. Stop crying. Please. I will be there. I promise."

A few tears tumbled down her sore cheeks, but she did her best to swallow the rest back as he gently picked up her arm again. There was a pinprick point as a needle was inserted. With how much pain her body had gone through and was currently in, it felt like a tiny prick in comparison.

The drug began to work quickly, and Christine watched with heavy eyes as Erik put away the supplies in the bag. Thoughts suddenly crowded up in her sluggish brain, and she gave a muffled exclamation of surprise and fear.

"What is it now?" he said quickly.

"Erik," she said, her mouth heavy, her mind swimming. "You can't..." She reached out with her uninjured hand, stretching her fingers, and Erik, maybe worried that she was trying to show him an injury, carefully grasped and examined it.

Christine tried again, hating that she had forgotten to say this before he had injected her. "With...him." It was such an effort to move her mouth. So much work. But she had to. And her mind was fuzzier now. Words came to her with increasing difficulty. "Don't...not..." It was hard to keep her eyes open. With a supreme effort, she managed to mumble out, "Don't...kill." It was not the way she wanted to tell him not to do what she feared he would, but it would have to suffice, as her body was growing heavier and her eyes were drooping.

"Savino?" She could hear Erik's voice, distant and still confused. "Christine? Is that what you mean?"

"No...killing." And that was it. With a sigh, she allowed her mind to slip away from the pain and the fear...and the confusing joy of seeing *him* again.

***Chapter 25*: Chapter 25**

The silence frightened her as soon as she was coherent enough to recognize it. Her heart began to race, jolting her quickly into full consciousness. There was no music to gently coax her awake, and terrified that for some reason she had imagined it all and she was still trapped in Savino's apartment, she wrenched her heavy, aching eyes open

Her bedroom in Erik's apartment greeted her instead, and Christine blinked slowly a few times, silently taking in the familiar walls, furniture, lighting...even the pale pink bedding, crisp white sheets, fluffy pillows, everything as she remembered. Her heart slowed momentarily and then began to pound again. She was grateful beyond measure that she was no longer trapped with Savino, but the fact that she was here, that Erik had apparently kept his promise and was undoubtedly somewhere close by, caused her head to spin. Now what did it all mean? Now what was she going to do?

The silence in the apartment seemed to magnify the dull pounding in her head, and she furrowed her brows, uncomfortable in every way possible. A few fingers on her right hand were throbbing painfully. Her mouth was parched and her lips dry, and when she parted them to take a breath, she felt her tight lower lip crack and split open, blood beginning to dribble into her mouth. Every part of her ached with exhaustion, and each breath caused a twinge of pain in her side. Her entire body felt sticky, sweaty, and dirty.

She looked over and saw that a chair had been placed in the room next to the bed. The nightstand next to it was covered in medical supplies; new bandages, medical scissors, unidentifiable creams and ointments, and there were even a couple little pills there. An empty coffee mug sat on the stand as well. Just the sight of it caused her mouth to somehow become drier, reminding her that she needed water.

Swallowing painfully, she looked toward the closed bathroom door, wondering if she would be able to get to it silently. She could get water from the sink and see just what she looked like, how bad her injuries were.

Before doing so, she took stock of the rest of her body. Three of the fingers on her right hand were wrapped up in bandages and a splint, and her left knee was in some kind of tight bandaging as well. She could feel sticky ointment on large parts of her skin, particularly on her ribcage, and she looked to see that she was dressed in a plain white nightgown with nothing underneath. Her cheeks grew immediately hot, though she tried to be mature about it. It was necessary to get the dirty clothes off of her to see her injuries and help her, but the thought of her own nakedness made her slightly sick. If she could make it to the bathroom, she could also look in the closet for some clean underwear to help her feel more covered.

With a breath, she rolled over to the edge of the mattress. Immediately, her ribs protested the sudden movement, and she gave a choked cry of pain and stopped instantly, sinking back down into the pillow with a shuddering sigh.

A moment later, footsteps drew close to the door, and before she could prepare herself, it was opened, and *there he was*.

He stood there in the doorway, tall and powerful, and she felt her heart skip several beats at the sight. He was just as she remembered, his hair dark, his eyes burning, and for a moment, the pain seemed to fade as he watched her.

Then he spoke, and somehow everything seemed different than before, different from those months ago, different from those horrible few minutes together in Savino's apartment. His voice was soft, guarded.

"Do you know who I am?"

She blinked. That was the last thing she had expected him to say. "What? Of course," she whispered, her voice hoarse.

He took a few steps closer, gesturing around the room. "And do you realize where you are? Do you remember this place?"

"Yes, of course I do." Her throat felt like sandpaper, and her voice sounded like it.

"When I found you, you asked me to be here when you woke. Do you recall?"

Becoming sincerely confused, she nevertheless replied, "Yes, Erik. What are you—?"

"And now what? I am here. You are safe now. Perhaps you wish me to take you to a hospital. You can finish your recovery there. The arrangements will be made immediately."

"What? No!" she rasped, trying to sit up and failing, groaning in pain as she lay back down. He took two steps closer but still remained a fair distance from the bed.

"Are you in a great deal of pain?" he asked.

Compared to the pain she had been in immediately following the whole horrible ordeal with Savino, the pain she was in now felt like a pinch in comparison. Still...it hurt.

"I'm thirsty," she said.

He nodded and then walked out of the room. She could hear a low murmur of voices, and she strained to hear, but then Erik returned accompanied by someone, and she gasped at the sight.

"This man is a medical doctor," Erik said to her, obviously interpreting her gasp as one of fear. "He is—"

"Dr. Khan!" she said, louder than she intended.

There was a pause, and Dr. Khan hesitated for a moment before clearing his throat and stepping around Erik to approach her, holding a glass of water. He set it down on the nightstand before leaning over to help her sit up, being mindful of her ribs.

"It would appear you are acquainted already," Erik then said, his voice low and suspicious.

Christine didn't reply; she was already gulping down the glass of water.

"Don't drink so fast," Dr. Khan said, pulling it away from her. "You will be sick."

The water seemed to wash away a slew of pain—or was it merely the fact that *he* was here? She held the glass tightly between her palms, glancing from Dr. Khan to Erik, the latter appearing to grow more agitated by the moment.

She looked over to Dr. Khan in some confusion. "Didn't you tell him?" she said.

Dr. Khan appeared a little uncomfortable and hesitated again.

"Tell me *what*, exactly, Nadir?" Erik hissed.

A long minute of silence followed, and then Dr. Khan said quietly, helping Christine drink a bit more of the water, "Christine came to see me in London last year."

"*What?*" Erik's voice shook the room, and Christine choked at the sound, at once overwhelmed by the memories of that voice, of the power it had, of the feelings it could elicit. She coughed on the water, and that agitated her ribs. Tears filled her eyes, and she doubled over, moaning.

She could hear a few fast footsteps as Erik drew closer, perhaps to see what was hurting her, but she heard Dr. Khan say firmly, "Enough. You are distressing her. Get me the ice from the kitchen."

There was a silent, palpable battle in the room as Erik seemed to fight between the desire to shout himself hoarse at Dr. Khan and the desire to help her. After a few seconds, however, he left the room, and Dr. Khan helped her lay back down. Her breathing came easier then, and she squinted up at him, frowning.

"Why didn't you just tell him before?"

Dr. Khan gave her a humorless, tight-lipped smile. "Was his reaction not enough reason for you?" He gave a short sigh. "To be quite frank, though, I wished to wait until you were at least awake, and I waited for selfish reasons. I am relying on you. He has to be civil around you."

She gave a slight laugh, and her lip seemed to split open wider. Dr. Khan frowned and pulled lightly at her lower lip with his index finger. "Split again. It was deep, though..." From the nightstand, he put some strong-smelling cream onto a cotton swab and smeared it onto her lower lip. She caught just a taste of it as it crept between her lips, and she pulled a face, disgusted.

Erik returned after another moment, and Dr. Khan pulled back the sheets just a little to press an ice pack against her side. It was freezing, and she gave a little startled gasp at the temperature, but soon the ache in her ribs abated. She already felt exhausted again.

As Dr. Khan was holding her wrist in his fingers and looking at his watch, Erik finally said something, though his voice was low and fast and in what Christine could only assume to be Persian. Dr. Khan replied quickly, shortly, and Erik said something else, his tone harsh, the volume of his voice rising.

"That's not fair!" she interrupted before Dr. Khan could say anything. "I can't understand what you're saying."

"And you have no need to," Erik said shortly.

"All you've ever done is hide things from me," Christine said. "Why do you think I went to see Dr. Khan in the first place?"

"Yes, and I am sure he told you *lovely* stories," he growled. "You must have been delighted to hear how—"

"I believe," Dr. Khan interrupted loudly, pointedly, "that I should examine your injuries, Christine. Now that you are awake, you can tell me what hurts the most." He turned and glared at Erik. "Why don't you try to be useful and get some food in this place. You haven't fed me properly since my arrival, and I am sure that Christine is hungry as well."

Erik said something in Persian that Christine was relatively certain was a rude insult, but he left, not quite slamming the door but not closing it softly, either.

Dr. Khan rolled his eyes and sighed softly. "I am still jet-lagged," he said, putting the ice pack down on the nightstand. "He has no real food in this place and no proper bed, either. What an idiot."

Amazingly, his comment caused Christine to giggle. Dr. Khan had told her the worst things about Erik, but he had also spoken the most kindly about him, had claimed to be his friend, and she believed it. When Madeleine had insulted Erik, Christine had felt horrified and defensive. Savino's insults had made her sick inside. Now, Dr. Khan's insults made her laugh. They were not genuine—well, maybe they were a little, but there still seemed to be an underlying friendship there that gave them the right to insult each other.

"It doesn't help that he is still ill himself," Dr. Khan then said, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

"He's sick?" Christine said, almost shocked at the thought. "What?"

"He's fighting off the last stages of malaria," he said, opening the bedside drawer and pulling out a few more medical things. "It is not contagious, so you have nothing to worry about. It simply makes him somehow more bad-tempered, if that is possible."

"Malaria?" She wracked her pounding head. "How did he even...?"

"You are not the only one who has been traveling the world this past year," Dr. Khan said, sounding a little grim. "Perhaps you should ask him for specifics, if you're so set on knowing."

Christine wanted to keep pressing for answers, but she didn't get the chance, because he then said briskly, "Now. I'd like to see how your ribs are doing, if you don't terribly mind."

There was a pause, and she felt a blush bloom on her cheeks. There was nothing underneath that nightgown except her skin. She would have to pull it all the way up, and Dr. Khan would...

He sensed her hesitation. "Christine, I am a doctor. I will not ask you to do anything you do not want to, but I promise that there is nothing but medical concern in this. I need to see how your ribs are healing."

After a moment, she gave a short, determined sigh and nodded, telling herself to not be such an embarrassed little girl. And Dr. Khan had undoubtedly seen it all when she had first arrived. Still...she couldn't quell the hot blush as Dr. Khan helped her pull her nightgown out from underneath her and over her arms and head.

He clicked his tongue. "You've started your menstrual cycle, I believe." She looked to see that the white nightgown had a large, unsightly bloodstain on it, and the sight made her stomach sink. In all her stickiness and pain, she hadn't noticed the dull ache of cramps or the dried blood on her thighs. She felt helpless, exposed, and disgusting. Tears pricked the corner of her eyes.

Dr. Khan noticed immediately. "Are you in pain?"

She shook her head. "No...I just..."

This was how she returned to Erik. Not proud, strong, confident...She came back to him weak, hurt, bleeding. Just as he had always viewed her. Something defenseless and fragile to be taken care of, something he needed to protect. She had wanted to protect herself. She had wanted to protect *him*. Yet when it came down to it all, she hadn't been able to. She hadn't protected herself or him. She was weak, just as he had always seen her.

"It's all right," Dr. Khan said softly. "You're exhausted, mentally and physically. A lot has happened to you. You simply need time to rest and heal."

She nodded quickly and wiped at her streaming eyes, sniffing.

"We're all of us tired and overwrought," he continued. "Erik is the worst I've seen him. He still will not believe me when I tell him that there is no magical instant cure for your injuries and that they simply need time to heal." He smiled again, and she liked his smiles. She had liked them in London, and here, in Erik's apartment, they were comfort and reassurance. Somehow, she didn't feel as uncomfortable under his gaze.

"But for now, I will look at your ribs, and then maybe you would enjoy a warm bath and something to eat. That is, assuming Erik has brought back something substantial."

"Probably not," she said, and somehow she managed to return his smile.

She kept her arms over her breasts and the blankets around her waist as Dr. Khan frowned over the ugly purplish bruises on her sides and ribcage, but somehow she could sense his doctor persona coming through, which helped her keep her blush down and her mind calm.

"They look much better than when I first saw them," he said. "They seem to be already healing well. I'm afraid there really is no instant cure for bruised ribs, but painkillers and ice will help these first couple days. You should be able to move and breathe without pain after a week or so."

"And my fingers?"

"They will heal in a month or so, but luckily that injury is not serious, either."

As Dr. Khan started to draw the bath for her, Christine used the opportunity to wrap herself up in a loose sheet. There was no need to parade around naked in front of him. Carefully, slowly, being mindful of her ribs, she scooted out of the bed and stood gingerly. It felt good to be standing up, but it presented a whole new set of problems. Her body felt very heavy, and her skin was tight and uncomfortable. She put a hand on the headboard for a moment, breathing and trying to get used to the sensation of standing again.

The sheets beneath her had a large bloodstain, and she blushed brightly at the sight. There was no way she wanted Erik to see that. He wasn't totally ignorant when it came to women; she was positive he knew of menstrual cycles, but the thought of him seeing that blood...She pulled down the comforter and began to strip the bed of the soiled sheets.

Dr. Khan hurried out and actually put his hands on her shoulders, gently pulling her away, saying, "No, Christine. Leave that."

"But there's blood on it," she mumbled, feeling stupid.

"Don't worry about the linen. I will clean it up. Simply go to your bath."

Too tired to really argue, she let him guide her away and to the bathroom, where a fresh towel, nightgown, and pair of underwear were all neatly folded on the counter, waiting for her. Her blush came back.

"You should not wear a bra until your ribs heal," Dr. Khan said, noticing where her gaze was lingering.

"But..." she protested, already embarrassed at the thought.

"No," Dr. Khan said, his voice set. "That is where I insist as your doctor. It would be very painful for you and would slow down your healing. It could also cause internal problems. It should only be for a week or so."

He didn't give her a chance to argue again, instead going over to the mostly-bare cupboards and looking around. Christine could see that the soaps and lotions that Erik had provided her with before had disappeared, probably expired. Now there was nothing in there but a hand mirror and an unopened toothbrush. Dr. Khan pulled them out and made an annoyed, frustrated noise in the back of his throat.

"Of course he has nothing for your cycle," he said angrily, shutting a cupboard door loudly.

"He couldn't have known I would start now," she said timidly.

"It doesn't matter," Dr. Khan said. "It is common courtesy. He should have known this."

But he didn't, Christine thought to herself, knowing it would be useless to argue. *He didn't. Doesn't.* Erik didn't know a lot of the unspoken, common things when it came to women. And...she wasn't going to condemn him for it. From what she had heard of his life, he hardly ever had a real chance to learn.

"I will get some things for you and be back in thirty minutes," Dr. Khan then said, running a hand through his dark hair, looking exhausted and frustrated. "Do not strain yourself; take your time in the bath, all right?"

She nodded, and he left, the door closing firmly behind him.

The bath felt like heaven against her body, and though it was slightly uncomfortable with some of the darker bruises on her skin, overall she felt as if a weight of pain was sliding out of her and into the water, leaving her lighter than before. She knew her hair was dirty and greasy and washed it gratefully, though she was careful with her damaged fingers. She was also able to locate where most of the pain in her body was concentrated; her fingers, her right side, her left knee, and her headache. Through suppression of what she suspected were painkillers, she could faintly feel cramps in her lower abdomen and was grateful that they weren't more painful. She would have to be sure to keep on top of them so she wasn't in any more unnecessary pain.

When the water became cool, she at last clambered out, wincing a little as some of her bruises bumped up against the tub. It still hurt to put direct pressure on her ribs or breathe too deeply, and so she was more mindful than ever as she toweled herself dry. Her skin looked awful, splotched with bruises in various shades, some healing faster than others and resulting in an ugly myriad of sickly colors; brownish-purples, greenish-yellows, reddish-pinks, all over her. And all from Savino.

Her breath caught a little in her throat, and her heart raced, as if expecting him to walk into the bathroom and begin beating her again. And yet, Christine did not even know if he was still...

Erik had kept one promise to her. Had he kept the other one? What if he hadn't? She would be confronted with a murderer. Erik had already killed people, and Dr. Khan had said that they had all been bad people as well. Still...the thought made her stomach twist. And even though Savino had hurt her, he had been someone she met and knew, and the thought of Erik killing him made her feel sick. The thought of anyone killing anyone was just...unpleasant. And Erik, who made such beautiful music, who spoke and moved with such elegance, who had loved her so deeply, so passionately, had killed before. Had her drugged plea been enough to stop him from doing so again?

There was a knock on the door, and she paused, securely holding the towel around herself.

"Christine?" It was Dr. Khan. "I have some things for you."

Grateful beyond measure, she went to the door and opened it to take the paper bag Dr. Khan was holding out of her.

"Thank you," she said, peering into it, relieved to see everything necessary to deal with her period. He had bought the nice, expensive stuff, too, and she almost laughed.

"You'll need to take more painkillers with your meal," he said. "There's something ready for you when you are." He paused and rolled his eyes. Then he said, more quietly, "*He* would also like to see you. I'm sure he thinks I'm mistreating you or hurting you somehow in my medical *ignorance*, as if he was the one who spent ten years getting his license."

She felt bad but also slightly wanted to laugh again.

"I can tell him you're too tired," Dr. Khan then said. "If you would like to be more rested and have some time to gather your thoughts."

Pausing, the paper bag crinkling under her fingers, she swallowed a few times and then said, "I'll...I'll talk to him. Just for a few minutes, I guess. I mean..." That was the whole reason she was here, wasn't it? She had made him promise to be here when she woke up. What would be the point of that and then refuse to even see him?

Dr. Khan raised an eyebrow but then nodded. "All right. Just come out when you're ready. And remember to not wear a bra."

Christine rolled her eyes but blushed as she closed the door. At least she was allowed to wear underwear, and she felt marginally better as she slipped it on. She then left the bathroom, more than ready for some warm food and sleep.

She was not ready, however, for Erik, as he entered a minute later and silently placed a bowl of steaming soup and a glass of juice next to her. His eyes were burning, and they stared at her. She was grateful that Dr. Khan had changed the sheets as he had said he would, and she held them up to her neck, painfully self-conscious of her lack of bra.

As best she could manage, she picked up the soup and ate it while keeping herself covered. Erik simply stood there, staring, which made her more uncomfortable. After another minute, she cleared her throat and awkwardly gestured to the chair.

"You can...sit down?" she said quietly, nearly spilling hot soup down her front as she held the bowl with one hand.

"You must take these," he said in reply, putting two little white pills next to her glass of juice. "They will help relieve the pain."

"Thank you. I will." She cleared her throat and stared at her soup, warm and delicious. She hadn't realized how hungry she was until she had started eating it. For some reason, she felt as if she hadn't eaten her fill in almost a year, as if her body had been hungry this whole time, and she ate the whole bowl and drank the entire glass of juice—pills with it—before giving a sigh and sinking back into the pillows, her body numb and full and tired.

"Would you like more?" His voice was polite, distant, as if she were some customer at a restaurant.

She shook her head and looked up at him. "I'd like you to sit down...if you want to. I mean...you don't have to stand there." Especially if he was still sick, it was probably best for him to rest, right?

He visibly hesitated, and then he slowly sat down, as if expecting her to suddenly change her mind and order him to leave. She watched him, confused for a moment, before realizing that he also probably had no idea what he was supposed to do in this situation. It wasn't exactly something that happened every day, and she wondered if he really would have taken her to a hospital had she not made him promise to be there, if he had really intended to only get her away from Savino and then leave her again, no answers, nothing spoken between them.

"Yes," he said suddenly, shortly, somewhat angrily. "Well. I am afraid that I am still hideous. There's nothing for it, unfortunately."

She frowned before realizing that he thought she was staring at him, and then she shook her head. "No, I was just...Sorry. I didn't mean to stare." She was also looking for any signs of his own illness. What were the symptoms of malaria? How serious was it? If he was getting better, then it obviously wasn't that dangerous. But wasn't that a disease usually contracted in tropical regions of the world? Dr. Khan had said that Erik had also been traveling the past year. Where had he been?

"I will be contacting your boy as soon as possible," Erik then said, almost matter-of-factly. "He will come at once to collect you, as you undoubtedly wish."

"My boy?" she repeated, confused. It took her a moment. "Oh—oh. Raoul? N-no, Erik, please don't..."

"I am certain you would have preferred *him* to take you from that horrid place, but there were too many variables with that option—that and the fact to consider that de Rege is somewhat talented with his semiautomatic. You would have been devastated had the boy wandered in unprepared and unknowing."

"Well, of course I would—not because..." She knew the topic would come up, but she hadn't realized it would be so soon, and she was feeling tired and full. With a careful breath, she said, "We're not together anymore. Raoul and me. We're not...a couple. Please, please don't contact him."

There was a pause, and he looked at her closely. "I am aware that he has not married you yet," Erik said quietly. "But he must still—"

"There's no 'yet,'" she interrupted. "I haven't seen him since last summer when we broke up. It's—it's over between us. Forever. Please don't try to talk to him."

Another silence followed this. "You have no romantic attachment to him any longer?"

She hid her smile. It was a very fancy way to ask her if they were actually broken up for good. "No. No romantic attachment of any kind. He's not even in the country right now. So it would be really awkward if you called him up to tell him to come get me."

He sat back in his seat, looking confused, and she couldn't hold back her grin. It stretched her bottom lip, and she grimaced a little as a few drops of blood slid into her mouth. She wiped them away, hating that every slight movement caused some amount of pain somewhere. It brought her back to an unpleasant thought, and she became nervous.

"You still look at me strangely," Erik said, his voice hard.

Taking a breath, though not too deep, she said, "I just want to know what happened with...with Savino."

He became even more tense in the chair, his eyes narrowing, his fingers curling into fists in his lap. "I see the Iranian spared no details during your lovely little *holiday*. That is why you stare at me with such disgust. I see. Because I have killed."

"I didn't say that," she whispered. "I mean...yeah, Dr. Khan did tell me...things. But I—"

"Lovely things?" he interrupted with a snarl. "Pleasant things about the monstrous Erik? You were apparently determined to dig around an abhorrent past that held nothing but blood and horror. As if you had not experienced enough last year at my hands! Now you are afraid of me even more. But I would have taken you to a hospital immediately had you not insisted on this wretched arrangement. So here I am, as I promised. And I will not keep you here. You may leave whenever you wish. You will not be the monster's prisoner yet again! Your terror is only growing the longer you are in my presence. But *you* insisted on it! I never—"

There were suddenly three loud *thumps* on the door, and Christine jumped a little at the sudden noise and then winced at the pain that came from sudden movement.

Erik glanced at the door and then sank back into the chair, suddenly looking...sullen.

"I should not upset you," he said, his voice grudging and unhappy. "You must rest."

She was tempted to take this escape and go to sleep, to avoid things she didn't want to hear, but she kept her eyes open, still watching him, determined. She didn't travel to two countries and then get held for ransom by a crazy man just to ignore this entire thing and sleep.

Still...she was nervous. She had forgotten just how difficult it was to talk to him when he was upset. It was nearly impossible. He took one thing—one word or sentence that wasn't perfectly-chosen—and twisted it until it resembled his own fears, somehow convincing himself that what she was saying was what he knew all along she would say, even if it wasn't.

She pushed a damp curl from her cheek and pulled the sheets up a little higher before saying quietly, "Erik. I asked you to be here when I woke up, and I'm glad that you are. And you're right; I'm really tired and I need to sleep. But...I just need to know now. Just tell me yes or no, and I promise I won't say anything. I swear. I want to know if you...k-killed Savino." The words were harder to say than she had thought they would be.

He leaned forward in his chair slightly, his eyes still narrowed, as if staring her down. Tilting his head to the side slightly, he breathed softly and then said, his voice calm, "No."

Although she had tried to forbid herself from having any expectations about this, about hoping for anything, the answer he gave her caused relief to bloom in her chest, and she released a breath, saying, "Really? Erik! I can't believe—!"

"You swore to say nothing," he interrupted shortly, without emotion. "And do not think me some merciful saint. I hurt him very badly. He might never make a full recovery."

Her stomach clenched. What was she supposed to do about this new gray situation? It wasn't murder, but was it still wrong? Was that kind of retribution acceptable as long as Savino was still alive? But what else could Erik have done? What other kind of justice could he have dealt that could have satisfied him?

Obviously not waiting for her to figure out her feelings regarding the information, Erik bent over to grab something and then stood, putting what she recognized as her purse on the now-empty chair. "Everything is there," he said, taking a few steps toward the door. "Now rest."

Before he left completely, she said, her voice much louder and more high-pitched than she intended, "Erik? You'll—you'll still be here when I wake up, right?"

He glanced at her, his eyes guarded. Then he said, "If that is what you wish." And with that, he left the room.

Christine stared after him for a few long moments, somehow wanting to laugh and cry at the same time. Instead, she leaned over to her bag, hissing as her side burned, and pulled it to her, digging through. Erik must have found it somewhere in Savino's apartment. Her wallet was still there, all her cards and identification right where she had left it. And her phone...She pressed the button and found it was dead. That did not bother her. She put it back in and then tossed the bag back down on the floor.

Exhausted, elated, in pain, and too tired to continue to think any more about it all, she sank deeply into the soft pillows and eventually slept.

Chapter 26: Chapter 26

The silence would drive him mad.

He had half a mind to drown it out at the piano, and he glanced at it, his fingers twitching. However, he had been *forbidden*, as if he were still some idiotic boy. He was not allowed to make noise, to do anything resembling noise.

"She needs rest," the irritating Iranian had told him. "If you so much as touch that piano, you will wake her up. So for once in your life, please consider someone's comfort other than your own."

He had been so outraged at having been spoken to thusly that he would have gladly sat down at his piano and played something simply to annoy him—perhaps the third movement of Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit*. Maybe then that overbearing Persian would learn that he was not to be addressed like that.

However...he did nothing. He simply paced, tapping his fingers every so often, glancing in turn at the piano and the closed bedroom door. He could feel his being strain toward that room, toward the door, behind which *she* slept, and he paused before sitting in the armchair, gripping it tightly, forcing his body to obey him. Seeing her again would be an undoing of the careful work he had done over the past few hours as she rested; and yet, when she woke, he would see her again.

It was completely beyond him as to why she would continually request that he *be there when she wakes*. Why would that foolish girl still wish to see him? Was she in such horrible pain that she did not realize what she was saying? He wanted to grab her, shake her, demand answers from her, but the sight of her bruised, delicate skin stopped him and made him ill himself.

That first glance of her after nearly a year of separation had nearly undone him. She had been shivering underneath that bed, curled up like some wounded animal, her face bloody and swollen, and her cries of pain as he touched her burned him as well. His vision had turned red, and he had felt the lasso in his pocket, weighing him down, commanding him to do what he must.

There was a slight *click* as a door opened, and his hand clenched into a tight fist as he turned.

"That is not a bed," Nadir said, his expression one of disgruntled displeasure. "How am I supposed to sleep on a metal plank?"

"Ah, shouldn't the doctor be aware of the benefits of a hard bed? Better for the back and all that, you know..."

Nadir rolled his eyes and sighed, glancing at his wristwatch. "She's not awake, is she?"

He paused, still beyond irritated that Khan was here in the first place, here and tending to her. "Not that I am aware of," he said after another moment.

A nod from Nadir before he disappeared around the corner, obviously needing some sort of sustenance to energize him. *He* tapped his leg impatiently, looking toward the closed door again. What would she say when she woke? She would undoubtedly come to her senses and shriek as soon as she saw him, beg Nadir to save her from the monster before it trapped her again.

The Iranian returned to the front room, holding a mug of foul-smelling coffee, and sat down, observing him over the rim of the cup.

"You might try to sleep a few hours yourself," he said. "The malaria isn't gone fully. You've been awake too long, and that is not good for the body or the mind."

"A truly inspired prescription," *he* snapped. "What a relief to know that you are here to make such medically-sound recommendations."

"If I remember correctly, you're the one who invited me to come. In fact, I don't believe 'invited' is the correct word. Perhaps forced. Or threatened."

He ignored his impulse to respond, to yell, and instead he sat back in the armchair, tense.

"She will be fine, Erik," he then said softly. "Don't worry."

"I am not worried," *he* replied.

"Aren't you?" Nadir said, sounding somewhat grim. "Physically, she'll heal just fine. She is young, and none of the injuries will cause permanent damage." He sighed deeply and ran a hand across his face, a sign of fatigue. Perhaps it should have bothered *him* that he had forced Khan to abandon everything and fly to New York immediately, no time given to arrange anything, no time for rest or objections—simply a threat that if he was not on the next flight to New York his limbs would be hacked off—yet it did not.

"So are you going to finally tell me, then?" Nadir asked after a moment. "Should I be expecting to see a picture of de Rege's body in the newspaper tomorrow?"

It took him a very long moment to answer. "No."

Nadir raised an eyebrow in surprise, which irked him. *He* would have liked nothing more than to read about de Rege's waterlogged corpse floating down the Hudson. But there had been...things to consider.

"Circumstances changed," *he* said shortly, answering and yet not answering the unspoken question. "As it is, he is sitting in some jail cell—likely incapacitated—waiting to be tried for kidnapping, soliciting prostitution, and extortion. Incidentally, I expect him to be retried soon for blackmail, bribery, fraud, money laundering...everything that he used to make his little mafia-run smuggling empire tick, in short."

"What do you mean?"

"I left enough evidence in that apartment to convict even the most well-connected mafia boss. I wish for him to suffer a good many years in prison—perhaps one hundred and fifty or so, give or take a few years." A pause. "Ah. But you are unhappy with this, Nadir. I can see it."

Indeed, Nadir's brow was furrowed, his mouth thin. "You can gather enough evidence in a matter of days to convict this idiot, but you wouldn't do it to clear my name after my conviction in Iran?"

"Your memory seems to be fading along with your hair. Let me remind you: it was only because of *me* that you were kept out of prison. I took very good care of you."

"Stop twisting the circumstances," Nadir scowled. "I might not have gone to jail, but thanks to your little smuggling game with de Rege, *I* was the one who took all the blame when it was finally discovered. A scapegoat who was told to leave the country. And I didn't have anything to do with it in the first place!"

"Yes, that was rather unfortunate," *he* said dismissively, somehow able to enjoy the color rising in Nadir's face despite the circumstances. "But look what I did for you after, Nadir. Were you not pleased when I finally got someone in that wretched, corrupt country of his to care about his illegal exploits? When I finally got it to come crashing down around him and bought you that ridiculous, overpriced bore in Chelsea with my profits? It was for you, you know. And you still will not accept my apology."

"Well, look where it's all gotten you," Nadir said, his voice uncharacteristically cold and mocking. "Just go take another look at that girl who was beaten like a dog. Because of you and your stupid games."

The words made him feel physically ill. They hurt more than any physical blow ever did or ever could. And he was sickened that they came from Nadir. He wanted to scream at the man, but he could not, because he was right. And *he* deserved every ounce of the pain. He deserved it a thousand times over.

A long pause followed. "I am sorry," Nadir said quietly. "I shouldn't have...No. You couldn't have known. She was doing this all without your knowledge."

"No," *he* murmured softly. "No, you are right. It is my doing."

"She's not an idiot, Erik. I'm sure she was aware from the beginning that looking for answers about you was going to be dangerous. In fact, when she first told me why she was in London, I actually..." There was a pause, and Khan then shook his head slightly. "Nevermind."

"What?"

"Nothing. I did ask her to stay in London longer, though. She refused."

"And I suppose you would like to tell me now just *how* she came to visit you? Exactly what sort of horrors you told her?"

Nadir shrugged. "She somehow found your *Shahnameh*, got the inscription translated, and tracked me down. And I told her the truth."

"That is unwise."

"And that is exactly your problem," Khan said. "You can't hide everything from her. After what she's been through, she deserves to know."

"She does not deserve any of it. Why should she be burdened and disgusted even further?"

"Christine came to me looking for answers to questions. It wasn't a burden to her to know. It was a relief. She said that she didn't understand and that maybe knowing more about you would help her."

"Yes," *he* snarled. "Just see how knowing has *helped* her. She cannot even breathe properly, thanks to that Italian pig."

Nadir grimaced and ran a hand over his face, exhaustion evident on it. *He* checked the time. It was still early evening, yet he was sure that Nadir had not slept properly in well over twenty-four hours. *He* had not slept since...since...When had he last slept? The past several days had been a hazy, feverish, rage-infused blur. He did not feel remotely tired. The malaria continued to linger, like some horrible parasite, but he was hoping that simply ignoring it would eventually make it go away.

"How did he get into contact with her?" Nadir then said, frowning. "There's some evidence of you and her...Maybe de Rege found it and put two and two together and then contacted her?"

The coincidence seemed too great a stretch, but *he* did not say that. He merely said, "Perhaps."

"And he went through Christine to get to you?" Nadir said, his brows furrowing. "That is in bad taste."

"Yes, it's all rather uninspired, isn't it?" *he* said. "Cliche, even. It took at least two days for me to wander into a region with any sort of signal to receive his initial message. And what was I to do then? My brain was half-dead, and I was miles away from anywhere. I don't have six million Euros sitting in some local account. Had he had some patience, I could have gotten him whatever he wanted within forty-eight hours, liquidated every asset I have. But he is an impatient coward and resorted to tantrum-throwing and beating a defenseless girl. Now he has nothing except lifelong physical therapy and a rather long jail sentence."

The mere thought made his lip curl. It was all he could do *not* to extinguish that worthless lump of flesh when he had been defenseless before him in that apartment, not to rip him apart, to deliver every excruciating torture imaginable when he saw what had happened to his songbird. And he wanted to inflict that pain upon himself as well. It was his fault. She was in that room because of his involvement in her life. He had seen and heard her screams, had despised himself more than ever because of what he had done to her. The images and sounds from the phone had made him vomit when he had first seen them. Even when he left to give her everything she wanted, she still suffered as a result of his own greed. He had ruined her forever.

Now that she knew with certainty what he was—that he actually was a monster, no matter what sort of charade he had initially given her—she would wish to be rid of him as soon as possible. For now, she stayed for her injuries, for Nadir. And once she left, *he* would be condemned to roam once again, living off the memories of their time together, pathetic and broken. It was no more than he deserved.

"What about Christine?" Nadir then said. "What is she going to do after all of this?"

"That is her decision alone. She will undoubtedly be overjoyed to return to whatever life she has chosen to live."

"And you?" *he* pressed.

"How is that your concern?" *he* said. "I intend to complete what I set out to do—waste away somewhere dark and unknown."

Nadir sat in silence for a few moments and then leaned forward, saying, his voice annoyingly-quiet, "Letting her go last year was the best thing you could have done for her. But I think now she—"

"Shut up," *he* said coldly. "You know nothing. You are here for her physical injuries, nothing more. I do not want your opinion on anything else."

It irritated him all so much because Nadir Khan was somehow the most honest and well-meaning man *he* had ever come across. That meddling doctor managed to

be right about nearly everything when it came to human interaction, something *he* had little to no expertise in. In Iran, he had been unhappy about it but had allowed Nadir to assist him in dealing with human diplomacy, knowing it had saved many lives, his own included. Now, however...Now he did not want to hear anything he had to say about *her*. This was an area about which Nadir knew nothing, no matter what he had told Christine, no matter what Christine had told him.

Khan rolled his eyes at the comment and was about to reply when there was the soft sound of a door opening. *He* shot up out of his chair, staring.

She appeared exhausted and feeble, standing there, leaning out of the door and looking around with some apprehension. A blanket was wrapped around her shoulders. Was she cold? He made a mental note to increase the temperature in the apartment.

"Sorry," she whispered, her voice rasping. "I just want a glass of water..."

He stood to fetch it immediately and heard Nadir say, "You shouldn't be up, Christine. You need to give your body time to heal and rest."

"I'll go right back to bed," she said, and the sound of her once-clear voice—fresh and clean and so utterly pure—reduced to hoarse whispers made him want to scream. He could envision himself finding de Rege in that prison and tearing his throat out.

As it was, he could not bear the thought of leaving her, and so he returned to find that she had already retreated back into the bedroom. *He* glanced at Nadir, suddenly unsure, and found himself both relieved and annoyed when Khan gave a small gesture toward the room, granting him permission. As if he required permission in his own apartment.

"*Don't start yelling at her again,*" Nadir said in stern Persian. "*I shouldn't have to tell you that, but apparently I do after your last visit with her.*"

In response, he gave a rather rude, vulgar gesture with his hand and said nothing in return, heading to the open door.

He entered the room with the same trepidation he had felt many times before and saw that she was slowly climbing back into the bed, every movement appearing stiff and painful. After sitting, she glanced over and saw him lingering stupidly in the doorway. A flush appeared on her pale cheeks, and she pulled the blankets up to her chin.

"Oh! I didn't realize you—ow." She cut herself off and pressed two fingers to her lower lip. He took several quick steps over and set the glass aside to see. Her lower lip had yet again split somewhat, and a few drops of blood welled up. She wiped them with her fingers, the blush still staining her cheeks. He handed her a tissue, which she used to dab at the blood, and then he did as he had seen Khan do before; he put some salve onto a cotton swab and hesitated.

"I will call the doctor, shall I?" He did not mean it to be a question, but she answered it.

"No—no, it's okay. You can...do it. I don't mind. It's just a balm for my lips."

Those lips. He felt his stomach clench as he carefully applied the salve, forcing his fingers not to tremble. He knew how they felt, their softness, their suppleness, how they burned and healed at the same time. He had memorized it all and had recalled the feelings countless times over the past year. And now he was staring at them again. They were cracked, dry, bleeding, so different from what he had felt against his own twisted mouth just last year.

And he could not help but wonder if she ever thought of that kiss.

No. No. She had most certainly blocked it from her memory. The notion of kissing a monster would make any good girl sick.

After he had finished, he handed her the glass of water and did his best to assist her without seeming to assist her as she drank it. Her left hand was weaker than her right one, the latter's fingers being injured and therefore somewhat useless at the moment, and she shook a little and was clumsy as she drank.

"Are you in pain?" he said as he set the empty glass aside. "Do you need more medication?"

"Maybe in an hour or so," she said, leaning back onto the pillow, the blankets still tucked around her chin. He needed to go turn up the heat in the apartment immediately. Yet he remained, unworthy to stand by her bedside and yet unable to move the slightest. Unbidden, words came to him.

*Yet loss of thee
Would never from my heart; no no, I feel
the link of Nature draw me...*

He mentally shook his head. No, he was exaggerating, creating ideas in his mind that did not exist. He thought that only because he wished it to be so. She did not feel any pull toward him, that much was certain. He would not allow her that indignity, not even in his own mind.

"Are you really mad at me?"

Abruptly drawn back into the present, he looked at her, her eyes wide and beautiful, tinged with dark rings of exhaustion and bruises. The sight made his heart clench painfully.

"Why should I be?"

"Because I went to see Nadir in London," she said quietly, toying with the splinter on her right hand. "You seemed really upset."

"It is hardly pleasing to know that all the sins of my past have been laid out so neatly. That knowledge was something I wished to shield you from."

"Because of you, or because of me?"

He examined her closely, enthralled by her, enraged by her, imprisoned by that gaze. There was a glint in her eyes as she looked at him that had not been there before. It unnerved him. There was some sort of hidden knowledge to which he wanted to be privy. The past year had altered her. It was a startling difference between the last time he had seen her, all tears and pleadings, followed by a sudden surge of strength and compassion that had broken him.

But there was no more time to muse on this difference. She was waiting.

"Both," he said simply, unwilling to elaborate on his meaning.

"Nadir didn't just tell me all bad things," she said. "He told me a lot of good things. You shouldn't be mad at him. I asked him to tell me. It wasn't his fault."

"He knows much more than anyone should, and it is not his right to disclose such things."

"Maybe not," she said, surprising him with her ready agreement. "But what else was I supposed to do?"

"Forget," he snapped, suddenly overcome with nearly a year's worth of torment and anger. "Move forward with your life and forget everything that happened here."

"How was I supposed to do that, Erik?"

His vision flashed, and he felt his fingers curl. Why was she being so utterly obstinate? She lay there, looking up at him so plaintively, her hair soft and curling around her shoulders, the pink blankets bringing a bit more color into her swollen cheeks. And he felt the months of heaviness and despair weighing on him, causing his head to cloud. He wished to scream at her, to force her to understand. *How could she still be here?* How could she ask him repeatedly to *be there* when she woke—when she woke from the pain-laced sleep that had been his own fault? Why was she not shrieking as she looked at him now? *Had* she perhaps actually forgotten what lay behind the mask? He was tempted to rip it off, to remind her of what she had escaped, yet he did not wish her throat to suffer any more damage than it had already endured, and so he contented himself with tightly gripping the back of the chair that had been pulled up next to the bed.

"I did what I could to ensure you would be free of this," he hissed, his teeth clenched. "Yet you deliberately sought after the sleeping horrors I had hoped to forever lay to rest. And now you know. And you are here, in this prison once again, when you could be anywhere else in the world. You could have married that boy and been beyond happy, yet you did not. Have you gone mad during our time apart, Christine? Have you utterly lost your mind? Simply tell me, and I will take you anywhere and disappear from your life, I swear to you. I will not be your captor, not again. It is enough."

Her eyes were shining brightly, and when she blinked, he saw two perfect tears escape and slide down her cheeks. With a trembling left hand, she brushed them aside.

Then she said, her voice wavering, "I asked you to stay with me, and you did. I asked you not to kill Savino, and you didn't. I believe you when you say that you would take me anywhere and disappear. But..." Here she paused, once again tugging at the frayed edges of the splint on her fingers. "I don't want you to." Her voice was soft, a gentle sound he had not heard in so long, though it was tinged by a raw soreness that would likely take several weeks of careful treatment to heal properly, to ensure that her voice could survive and continue on in its greatness.

He could feel hoarseness in his own voice as he at last said, "What do you want, Christine?"

She glanced up at him, her lashes fluttering and wet. "To be here. To heal. To talk with you. To understand."

"That is not...necessary," he replied after a moment. "You may remain here as long as you wish, but there is no need for any understanding. There is nothing to understand. If you are confused, as you say you are, I could give you any number of hallucinogens to aid with memory loss. It would be something of a clean slate, you see."

Her skin paled a bit under the bruises, and she shook her head. "No! I don't want that. I know more than I did before, but I want to know more. I've already talked to Nadir and your m—" Here she paused and coughed, and he, fearing the bruised ribs and the damage already done in her throat, moved somewhat closer but did not touch.

At that moment, the door opened, and Nadir entered carrying a tray laden with warm food and drink.

"I've already talked to Nadir," she repeated once her throat was clear again. A prickle of hot jealousy burned beneath his skin when he saw her smile at the Iranian behind him. "And to Savino."

"Ah. Yes. Tell me, what exactly did de Rege tell you to lure you in? To convince you to speak with him? More odious stories of my criminal misconduct?"

An expression of confusion passed over her features. "What do you mean? I contacted him."

There was a moment of silence, and *he* tensed immediately. "*What?* Why would you do such a thing, you foolish girl?! How did you ever find him?"

"Dr. Khan emailed me some things you left behind, and Savino's name was on some of the documents I looked through."

In a motion so swift and rage-fueled that *he* could barely see, he turned, feeling his fist connecting with a hard jawline. Nadir fell to the ground, the tray dropping as well, liquids streaming over the floor, seeping into the rug.

"*You sent her straight to him!*" he screamed. His vision clouded, and he continued to scream—exactly what, he could not say. Languages became muddled, mixed and sullied as every insult he could ever think of flew from his mouth. He wanted to grab that throat and choke the life out of it; the only fitting punishment for one of the most heinous crimes he could imagine.

A warm pressure by his side startled him, and he looked over to see a wave of tumbling curls on his arm as she stared up at him, her fingers tightly wrapped around his arm. All thoughts disappeared instantly from his mind, and he stared at her, only one thing clear:

She was touching him.

She was touching him, without force, without threats, her hand slender and perfect, just as he remembered it. How could he have ever imagined she would grace him with her touch once again? He deserved none of it.

"It wasn't his fault," she said after another long moment. Her eyes were pleading. "Please don't."

Several moments of silence were needed before he moved, wanting to take her into his arms but knowing it would not be permitted. As gently as he could manage, he pushed her back into the bed, where she pulled the blankets back up to her chin and watched him with eyes that had not yet lost their tears.

Glancing behind him, he saw Nadir quietly cleaning up the spilled food and drink and rubbing the rapidly-swelling side of his face.

"Well?" *he* hissed. "You have nothing to say?"

"Erik, how in the world was I to know?" Nadir's voice was short, taut, impatient. "I had Rahim scan the things you left behind. I thought that they were simply old books of yours. I had no idea that there was anything incriminating or dangerous in there." He then addressed her. "I never would have sent that to you had I known, Christine. I'm so sorry."

"It's not your fault, Dr. Khan," she said. "It isn't. Are you okay?"

"Fine. Though irritated that your lunch is now ruined." He stood with the tray and gave an annoyed noise in his throat before leaving.

"Don't be mad at him," she pleaded the moment the door closed. "It wasn't his fault. He didn't know."

"He was careless," *he* snapped. "Irresponsible." It felt somehow relieving to shift his fury to one person, to place the blame entirely on the Iranian.

"No, I was," she said. "I made a lot of mistakes when I contacted Savino." She brushed her fingers over her eyes, appearing exhausted again. The sight caused his heart to beat painfully. "But I'm okay now. And...you're here." She glanced up at him. It was almost as if he had forgotten how blue her eyes were, how wide and pure and innocent they were as they looked at him. And he fell in love with her all over again.

"Are you feeling better?" she then asked. "Dr. Khan said you're still sick."

He was growing irritated and tired of hearing *Dr. Khan said*...Nadir had said a great deal more than he had permission or understanding to. Perhaps Nadir simply still did not understand just where his place was in this entire debacle. That would have to be corrected.

"I am fine," he said at last. "It is nothing serious."

"He said it was malaria," she pressed. "Isn't that dangerous?"

"Nadir has *said* a great number of things to you, it would appear," he said, unable to keep a cold hiss out of his voice.

There was silence, and he could see her cheeks blush underneath the bruised and swollen skin. How could he have forgotten how easily that flush stained her cheeks? Shame once again swept over him, an emotion he was not familiar with nor fond of. Attempting to somehow mend her obvious hurt, he said quietly, "No. It is fine. I am fine. Nadir has a tendency to exaggerate."

She appeared unconvinced, but she did not continue to ask about his illness, which was a relief. And how could she care at all when she was still riddled with bruises and injuries of her own?

Nadir reappeared with another tray, and *he* did not miss the disgruntled scowl that was given him as the tray was placed over Christine's lap. She thanked him softly and smiled slightly.

"Is there anything else you need, Christine?" Nadir said, and *he* watched as the blush returned. It was captivating.

She shook her head. "Thank you for the food." Nadir carefully brushed a hand over her black eye, frowning deeply, before nodding and leaving the bedroom. *He* made every move to follow until her sore voice called out: "Wait, you're leaving too?"

"Is there something else I should be doing?" he replied. His voice was not pleasant enough for her; her face fell into a little pout.

"I thought you could stay..." she muttered, pulling at the splint on her fingers. "It gets boring sitting in here all by myself."

He paused for a moment and then sat down in the chair next to the bed. He was at least preferable to mind-numbing solitude. That was slightly comforting. She began to eat, and he waited in silence for several minutes before growing irritated by it. Why ask him to say if she was going to remain silent? He had any number of things he could have been doing instead of sitting and watching her eat. If he was forced to remain there, then, he might as well get some answers of his own.

"I understand you have my *Shahnameh*."

"Hmm? Oh." She smiled, appearing somewhat sheepish. "Yeah. Sorry. I have it at my apartment."

"I admit I did not even notice last year that you took it. What caught your attention? As far as I am aware, you do not speak Persian."

Christine cleared her throat, and he immediately sensed guilt. She was going to confess to something. Her reluctance to look at him and her blush were telling signs. What more had she done?

"I took it...after," she said. "I came back here last autumn and found it. Um—I took a couple of your other books, too. Sorry."

He paused. "You returned *here*?"

She nodded, still refusing to look at him, and he felt anger crawling up his throat. Nadir's words of warning echoed in his mind, and he obeyed them as best he could but was still unable to keep his voice from shaking slightly with fury.

"You mean to tell me that after *everything* that happened, you returned *here*? To this horrid place? To the place where I ruined you?"

"You didn't 'ruin' me, Erik," she replied quickly, frowning slightly. "And yeah. After I dropped out of classes, I came back here. Just...to see, you know? It all felt so surreal afterward, like it almost didn't happen. And...I wanted to see it again." She set her half-eaten plate aside and pulled a few loose, delicate curls behind her ears. "I never told the police about it, you know. I never told them anything about...here." She looked around the bedroom. Her prison bedroom. She had shed countless tears in this room, in that bed. He had *heard* her tears. Each and every one as they had fallen from her dead eyes. She continued, her voice becoming softer, almost dreamy, as she looked around, "I think I kind of wanted to keep this place...special. Just for us, you know? I didn't want everyone else to know. I didn't want anyone to see. It's just us here. And coming back last year—it helped me remember. I'm glad I did."

He stared at her openly, sickened and confused. "What are you saying?" he rasped. "What is *wrong* with you?"

Her cheeks turned red immediately, and her gaze dropped to her lap. She tugged on the splint again, and he saw through her lashes that tears were gathering in her eyes once more. She was fragile still, and there was a tentative trust that she had placed in him in allowing him to bring her back here. It was not fair that he accuse or deride her. She did not deserve that. She did not deserve *him*. She deserved better. And here he was, driving her to tears for the umpteenth time in one evening. He swore softly.

"If Nadir sees your tears, he will skin me alive with medical precision."

She choked out a laugh that was muffled by tears, and he attempted to continue with an awkward humor, hoping her eyes would dry. "Ah, you would like that, then? You would like if that happened to Erik?"

"No, of course not," she whispered, wiping away tears with trembling fingers.

"I do not mean to be cruel," he said. "I simply have a difficult time...understanding the choices you have made."

Another small smile from her. "Me too, sometimes. But...I think they were the right ones. I'm glad I made them. We're here because of them."

He did not respond. He could not.

Because what was he to say in response to that?

Chapter 27: Chapter 27

The door clicked shut softly, and Christine pulled off the clean, soft dress before lying down. After a week of almost daily check-ups on the healing of her ribs, she felt nowhere near as embarrassed as she had that first time, yet she still kept her arms firmly over her breasts and was glad that she was wearing underwear. Dr. Khan had told her she could start wearing a bra in the next day or two, and she had never thought that that prospect could make her so excited. She had been awkwardly covering herself for a week and was more than ready to get rid of the blanket, which had become smothering over the past few days.

Dr. Khan rubbed a cold cream onto some of the more serious bruising, though they were healing along with the others. Her skin now had patches of ugly green-tinged and yellowing bruises, which Dr. Khan said was good, a sign that they were healing nicely. Still, it looked awful, and she was glad that they were covered up most of the time. Her period had also ended the day before, which relieved a constant worried stress that she would accidentally bleed through the her clothing again.

She glanced up at Dr. Khan, who looked focused but agitated, and he wiped his forehead, swearing softly.

"I told him that he is going to roast me alive if he didn't turn down the heat," he said, setting the cold cream aside and moving to examine her knee.

The temperature in the apartment was nearly unbearable. It had risen steadily over the past week, and while the first few days had been nice, now it was simply ridiculous. She felt constantly sticky with sweat, and the fact that she always kept a blanket around herself didn't help at all. Dr. Khan was constantly complaining and had left the apartment several times to escape, saying that the summer heat outside was at least half the temperature of the apartment.

"And?" she said, wincing a little as he pressed a careful finger to a still-sore bruise on her leg.

"He said that he would break my fingers if I touched the thermostat." He grimaced and then sighed. "Maybe you could talk to him. I get to leave; you are staying here. You will die of a heatstroke soon unless he lowers the temperature."

She managed to laugh a little at that and was grateful when he handed her the flowing dress to pull back on, though the absence of clothing on her hot skin had felt good for a few moments. Still, she had refrained from saying anything to Erik in the concern that maybe *he* was cold and needed the higher temperatures. It had always been chilly in the apartment before. Maybe Erik had finally realized that and was trying to raise his already-cold body temperature.

"I'll see what I can do," she said, sitting up and feeling the slightest twinge of her ribs. There was no constant pain anymore; simply slight discomfort during certain movements. She was able to do everything she had done before without being in unbearable pain. Her fingers were still wrapped, and they would take more time to heal, but everything else felt almost back to normal.

"I'm sad you're leaving," she said honestly as Dr. Khan began to pack his medical supplies.

"I'll be sad to leave you," he said, glancing up to smile kindly at her. "Erik, on the other hand...I am only leaving you with him because I know he would never harm *you*."

"I'll be fine," she assured him, though her heart fluttered a bit nervously at the thought.

"Well, you now know how to get into quick contact with me if anything happens," he said, tapping her phone that had been sitting on the bedside table the past week.

"I guess I won't have to fly all the way to London to speak with you anymore," she said.

"Don't let the fact that I finally got around to giving you my personal number dissuade you from doing so," he said, looking so handsome and kind that Christine wanted to throw her arms around him. "You are welcome to visit anytime."

She pretended to itch her nose in order to wipe away a few tears, and then she said, "You're sure you can't stay longer? Maybe for dinner at least?"

"I'd love to, simply to annoy Erik, but I have to get to the airport. JFK is a nightmare, and I think Erik would actually kill me if I missed my plane and had to stay another night."

Christine paused. "I'm sorry he's been so...difficult this past week. I don't know what's wrong with him."

"I do," Dr. Khan said grimly. "You are back here, after he thought he would never see you again, and not only are you here, but you are being kind to him. Kinder than he ever deserves. He doesn't know what to do. And he blames himself that you got mixed up with de Rege. He thinks it's his fault that you were hurt so badly. He cannot cope with the guilt." Dr. Khan clicked his bag shut and looked at her seriously. "You should not apologize for him, either."

"I know, I just..." She trailed off, not knowing what else to say.

He paused for a moment and then said, "Christine, you are smart and old enough to make your own decisions. I know you'll do what you think is best. Please simply think about it before you do."

Blushing, she nodded and stood to follow him out of the room, the blanket securely around her shoulders. Somehow it was even hotter out in the main room, and she felt perspiration line her skin, prickling and uncomfortable. Erik was sitting in his chair, reading a book silently, his coat gone and his thin shoulders poking through the white fabric of his shirt.

She was a little surprised to see the cat at his feet, purring contentedly. Usually he didn't want it anywhere near him, even though it was obvious that the cat liked him more than it had ever liked Christine.

She had told Dr. Khan and Erik about her pet a week ago and had said she was afraid that it had been taken back to the shelter or maybe even put down. The next day, as he was bringing her some juice and some painkillers, Erik had also carried in a small box, put it on the bed, and opened it for her. The little gray cat had poked its head out, yowling loudly, obviously irritated at having been trapped in the box for who knew how long. Christine had immediately picked it up and burst into tears, thanking Erik over and over and burying her face in the soft gray fur.

There was no need to ask how he had found it. The kennel had charged her card for the extra days the cat had been there, and it wouldn't have taken that long to figure out where it was and which cat was under her name. But the fact that he had brought it to her the morning after meant he must have traveled all night to bring it, and that fueled her tears just as much as seeing her cat again. Her heart swelled a little more with gratitude toward him each time she saw it, and she felt

the sensation again as she looked into the front room, a slight smile tugging at her lips.

Erik hardly spared them a glance as they left the bedroom, though Christine could tell from his shoulders that he was tense and alert.

Dr. Khan set down his medical bag next to his suitcase and turned to look at her, smiling again and holding his arms out slightly in invitation. She took a few steps closer and wrapped her arms around him, grateful when his hands rested on her back, gently embracing her. It had been so long since she had had a real hug, especially from someone so kind, and she hoped he didn't think she was being silly when she held on for a few extra moments. When she stepped away, she was a little surprised to see that Erik had stood and had taken a few steps closer to them, watching the scene impassively. She blinked back a few tears and watched Dr. Khan pick up his suitcase and medical bag.

"I'm sure we'll see each other soon," he said, smiling. "Make sure to be careful these next few weeks, even though you're healing quickly. If you have any problems, please contact me immediately."

"I will," she promised. "Be safe flying home."

Dr. Khan looked toward Erik.

"Your hospitality this past week has been incomparable," he said, raising an eyebrow. The corner of his mouth twitched as well. "I am truly sorry I have to leave to return to my London flat with its bed and its kitchen with food in it."

Erik appeared unfazed by the sarcasm and instead said, "I wish to speak with you privately." He opened the door, and the two of them left. Christine stood there, slightly surprised and offended to be left there, before suddenly realizing that when Erik walked back through the door, Dr. Khan would actually be gone, and it would be just the two of them. *Alone*. For the first time in nearly a year.

A blush returning to her cheeks, she ran her left hand through her tangled curls, painfully aware that she hadn't managed her curls that day and had instead left them frizzy. She hadn't worn any makeup or a bra in a week, and she was suddenly going to be forced to confront her feelings when he walked back through that door. There was no more hiding behind Dr. Khan.

The door didn't open for a while, though, and eventually she sat down on the sofa, pulling the blanket off of her and fanning herself with her hand. Dr. Khan was right; she would have to ask Erik to turn it down.

The house was quiet now. Dr. Khan had filled it up with noise when he had been here, talking to her or making fun of Erik, something that made her giggle behind her hand. He always knew when to quit, though, when the line was being pushed too far and Erik's posture became too tense to ignore. Whenever Erik replied, it was usually in Persian, leading Christine to think that he was saying things he didn't want her to hear, probably rude things. Now there was nothing except the hum of the heater and her own quiet breathing.

She waited a very long time on the couch, picking up the cat and settling it on her lap, where it sat with her, watching the door, obviously waiting for Erik to come back as well. When the door finally opened, she quickly pulled the blanket back around herself, watching as he stepped in, closing the door behind him quietly and then staring at her.

"You are still here," he said, his voice guarded and expressionless.

"Where else would I be?"

"There is no doctor here to protect you anymore. I had assumed that you..."

Christine sighed and rubbed her eyes, trying not to be too annoyed. "Protect me from what, Erik? From you? Are you going to hurt me now that we're alone?"

His jaw clenched, and his eyes flashed. She knew that his temper had been barely-contained this past week, and sometimes he had left the apartment for several hours altogether, obviously not wanting to explode in front of her. She wondered if he would leave again.

He stayed, however, and was merely silent for a long while. The cat finally freed itself from her grip and left the couch to go meow at Erik's ankles, looking for attention. Feeling bad for what she had just said, Christine bit her lip and glanced at her lap before saying, hoping to fix the lingering tension, "I'm sorry...I shouldn't have said that. But—yes. I'm still here. If that's okay with you."

"You have asked repeatedly that I stay, so I am here."

She gave up that fight for a later day and decided to let him have that crutch for now, saying simply, "Yes. Thank you for taking care of me, Erik."

In a brief instant, so quickly she wondered if she had only imagined it, his eyes softened. Then he said abruptly, "You must eat something. That irritating doctor left food here and said you must eat it. As if he thinks I do not understand that food is necessary for survival..."

The dry comment made her smile, and she said, "Thanks, but I'm not very hungry right now. Maybe later. What did you say to Dr. Khan before he left?"

"Nothing of importance," Erik said. "Merely that our years of no contact after Iran were perhaps some of the most blissful of my existence and that I hoped for many more."

She wanted to roll her eyes and laugh at the same time. "I think you and Dr. Khan are really good friends, but you just don't want to admit it."

"Ah, if by friends you mean an overbearing, pompous annoyance who for some absurd reason believes himself to be entitled to the secrets of my life, then perhaps you're right."

"I don't think so. He told me enough about Iran to make me think that you two actually do care about each other."

It looked like he was going to say something in reply, but the heater groaned and pushed a scorching wave of heat into the room, and Christine wiped her forehead and said, almost desperately, "Can we please turn the heat down?"

"You are not cold?"

"What? No. It feels like a million degrees in here. Are you cold?"

"Of course not."

She was going to take his word on that one without argument. "Then we should have the air conditioner on. It's summer."

He disappeared behind a corner, and after a moment the heater gave a shuddering *clunk* and was silent. There was a whirring sound, and then she felt a blast of gloriously-cool air wash over her hot, sweaty face. It felt as if waves of irritations and pains left her.

"Thank you," she said as he came back into view. He nodded wordlessly and returned to his chair to pick up his book. The cat curled up at his feet again. She went to grab her phone from the bedroom and then sat back down on the couch, scrolling down to her new contact. *Nadir Farhadi Khan*. Quickly, she typed a new message.

What was that about?

It took less than two minutes for him to reply.

He thanked me for flying over to help.

Christine felt a small smile forming as she glanced over at him again.

Really? Sounds uncharacteristic of him lol

He just does it to annoy me because he knows I never expect it.

She laughed at that, and Erik glanced up at her. When she gave him a smile, he quickly looked back down to his book. She waited, expecting him to say something, but he didn't look back up. The silence was oppressive, and they sat there for so long that she started to become miffed. Was he just going to ignore her the entire time? Were they simply going to push aside all the confusion and emotion and questions that needed to be expressed?

She watched him intently, and by the stiffening of his shoulders and the way his neck tilted slightly, she could tell that he was aware she was staring, and he hated that. He lasted maybe another minute before he shut his book and turned to her.

"Yes, *what?*" he snapped. "What do you need?"

"Nothing," she said. "I'm just wondering if you're planning to ignore me the whole time."

"I am not ignoring you. I am reading. That is all."

"That's not true. You've barely said anything to me these past couple days."

His fingers tightened around the book, and he said lowly, coldly, "Forgive me for my poor manners, then, and my inability to read your mind to know precisely what it is you want. I would have thought you would be rather reluctant to speak with the monster who imprisoned you."

"Could you cut it out with the whole 'monster' mantra? Please?"

"No. No, I will not!" He stood, and she nearly shivered as she watched his long body unfurl, somehow taller and more ominous than she remembered. "It appears you have forgotten just what transpired here. Allow me to remind you."

And the mask came off.

Christine could feel her heart skip a few beats as she looked. It had been so long since she had seen, and memory seemed to have softened some of the details. She resisted the urge to avert her gaze, forcing herself to look. She had traveled thousands of miles just for him, and she had endured excruciating physical pain and humiliation just for this. She had *kissed* him. To turn away now would be an invalidation of everything she had ever done. Taking a much-needed deep breath, the first in over a week, she stood from the sofa. The cool air blowing around the apartment created goosebumps up and down her skin.

"I remember what happened," she said softly. "I remember everything."

"Then why are you still here?" His voice hissed unpleasantly.

That was the question, wasn't it?

She had everything she had worked for. She had the answers she had sought after. She had met figures from his past, had patched together a rough framework of his life, had slowly and painfully assembled the pieces of a puzzle until she could at last see the resemblance of a picture there. And she had seen *him* again. He had come for her, had rescued her. Savino would not touch her again. Everything had come full circle. But it didn't feel complete. She couldn't leave now. Was she selfish? Was staying here torturing him? Taunting him? Did he really want her to go?

Her silence seemed to irritate him further.

"Beautiful Christine is confused," he said, his voice mocking. "Perhaps deluded. Well, I will no longer tell you what you shall or shall not do. Your distaste for that was made abundantly clear. I will merely remind you of facts, with which you may make a clear, informed decision: I held you prisoner in this apartment for many weeks. I threatened you. I threatened your little love. And then I trapped the both of you. I was going to kill him. I was. It would have been without an ounce of remorse." He breathed deeply, as if not having done so for the past several minutes. Then he said shortly, with finality, "There. Now you may decide."

Hadn't Dr. Khan said something about this just an hour or so earlier? *I know you'll do what you think is best. Please simply think about it before you do.* And she had to decide on it now?

She watched him, his horrible face twisted in anger, and felt her stomach clench as she began to second-guess everything she had thought she knew. A threatening wave of fear and uncertainty washed through her. Could she really do this?

And then, just as she thought she would be overcome and would resort to weak pleadings and vague, unfulfilled promises, she saw a small shudder run through his tense shoulders, a betrayal of his outward expression of cold indifference.

Taking a few steps closer, she reached for the mask that was dangling between his long fingers. He pulled it away from her, and she looked up at him. A few

seconds of silence passed. His breathing became shorter.

After another moment, he let her reach farther around him and gently slide the mask from his hands, setting the surprisingly-heavy thing on the table beside his chair. And then, she gently grasped his hand.

"Stop," he rasped. "Stop this. I cannot do it again. I could not..." But he didn't pull his hand away, and she entwined her fingers with his.

"I don't have answers right now," she murmured. "And you don't, either. But that's okay. You're here. And I'm here. And that's enough for now."

"No. Stop. No more." His eyes closed briefly as she gave his hand a gentle squeeze. "I have ruined your life. I have broken you. Why are you doing this? You are crueler than I could ever be."

"No, Erik," she said. "We have a lot to talk about. We have a lot to do. We might hurt each other more before we get better. But we'll get better." She paused, wondering if she should, and then said quietly, softly, "This horror will grow mild, this darkness light."

His eyes widened. "You cannot...You should not...I will not..."

But he didn't stop her as she reached out and took his other hand, holding them, his fingers long and bony. She knew he wanted to protest. She knew he would in the upcoming days. Yet in that moment, there was no room for those thoughts, and she simply stood there, listening to him breathe, content to do so.

She could tell he was starting to become seriously annoyed.

"What are you doing now?"

She glanced up at him. His arms were crossed in impatience.

"I'm making sandwiches," she said. "It's a long drive."

"It is four hours."

"Yeah, a long drive. And we're driving during dinnertime. What if you get hungry?"

"I will not."

"But what if you do?"

"I will not."

"What if I get hungry?"

"Then I will buy you whatever you wish."

"But there's food here we can take and eat. It doesn't make sense to buy anything."

"If you continue to work at such a glacial pace, the food here will spoil by the time we actually get in the car."

She rolled her eyes and neatly cut the sandwiches in half before wrapping them up. "I'm almost ready."

"You said that thirty minutes ago."

"Are we in a hurry?" She licked some jam off of her thumb and pulled out a few apples, an orange, and a couple bottles of water.

"If I say yes, will you stop this?"

She gave him a smile, aware that she shouldn't push him, not when he was still so uncertain emotionally. So instead she sighed and put everything into a bag, which she strapped over her shoulder. Erik approached and took it from her.

"You are still healing." And he left the small kitchenette with it. She rolled her eyes yet again and followed him. Nearly everything was healed now. There was still a slight bruise on her right rib cage and knee, but they were yellowing, healing as well. The only thing still damaged was her fingers, and Erik was always annoyingly-paranoid about whatever she touched or held, as if picking up a book would break her fingers off.

Still, she was careful with them as she tucked the last shirt into her bag and zipped it up.

It had felt amazing to wear normal clothes these past few days, and she ran a hand over her loose green shirt and jeans, watching as Erik picked up her bag as well and looked pointedly at her.

"Are you ready now? Or do you require another thirty minutes for some other pointless task?"

She huffed. "I'm ready."

It was early evening, the sun beginning to sink low, and she breathed in the warm air. It was full of exhaust and soaked with the smell of hot pavement and bodies. She was more than ready to leave New York, at least for a little while. Maybe being away from the city in which so much had happened to her would give her a clearer perspective and a new way to examine her own feelings regarding...everything.

She glanced over at Erik and blushed.

The car was cool and clean, and he drove quickly but in an unhurried manner. Knowing that he wouldn't exactly want to listen to the latest pop single on the radio, she plugged her phone into the car and turned on a playlist she had made the night before, not wanting to sit in silence for over four hours.

The first thing he said, after nearly twenty minutes in silence, was a muttered, "This city is wretched."

"Do you want me to drive?" she offered.

"No. You would kill us within five minutes."

She folded her arms and glared out of the window. "I'm not that bad of a driver." Though she really didn't know. She had gotten her license when allowed and hadn't really driven a car since.

It had been her idea to leave New York, and she had approached him a few days ago and had said simply, not knowing how else to broach the subject, "Erik, I think it's time for me to go home now."

His entire body had stiffened, and he had spent a few long seconds in silence before replying, not looking at her, his voice strained, "Yes. That is...good. You have healed quickly and well, and it is...it is natural that you wish to leave. Yes. Very well. I will arrange it all. Simply tell me if you prefer to fly or take a train. Or I could arrange a driver for you."

"Would you drive me? Please?"

His body language and the expression in his eyes were all a clear answer: *No*. But he said, "...Yes. If you wish."

Here, she paused, and said, her own voice shaking a little, "And...will you stay with me for a while? At my apartment?"

There was only so far he would go, apparently, because he said shortly, "No. I will not."

"Why? Please? I want you to."

"Stop lying to me," he said harshly. "Stop it."

"I'm not lying. You know I'm not. I want you to come with me and stay."

He stared at her and then said, "Perhaps I should have insisted that Nadir perform a cerebral PET scan upon initial examination of your injuries..."

Christine flushed deeply and nearly took back her invitation. "That's mean," she said lamely.

"What other explanation could there be? You do not truly want a monster in your home."

"No, I don't want any monsters at my apartment," she said. "But I want you to be there. I won't force you. But I want you to come."

And with that, she went back to her room to let him stew over her invitation. The next afternoon, when she had brought up the subject again, he had reluctantly accepted, muttering that it was only because *she* wished it, and she had tried not to feel smug satisfaction.

She herself wasn't clear with what exactly she was going to do with him when they got there. All she knew was that she had to get away from New York. But she didn't want to leave him. And there was the real life aspect of it all, as well. She still paid rent on the apartment, and she had to figure out what to do with her job.

It felt freeing to be away from the city at last, as if an unknown weight she had been carrying was lifted from her. She was able to relax more fully, and she quietly sang along to the music as she watched the tall buildings shrink, then turn into houses, then turn into nothing. There were fields and parks and rivers, and she could see, in the distance of the gathering darkness, lights that signified residences set away from the interstate.

The cat was meowing pitifully, obviously unhappy to be in its crate, and Christine kept glancing at it before trying hesitantly, "Erik, can I...?"

He gave an annoyed sigh. "Very well. Release that horrid little beast. At least then it will stop making such irritating noises."

Grinning, she clicked the crate open and pulled out the cat, hugging it and then putting it in her lap. Surprisingly, it didn't try to wriggle away toward Erik, maybe knowing it would be forced back into the crate if it did, and instead simply curled up in her lap, purring, though it kept close to the driver's side.

Night quickly set in fully, but they were still a few hours away from their destination. She offered him food several times, but he didn't take any. She ate half a sandwich but felt self-conscious doing so, aware of the crumbs and the jelly on her cheeks. So she put the rest away and let the cat lick the remaining jelly off her fingers, laughing as it did so.

The Tender Land drifted quietly around the car, and she sang along with Laurie, not knowing all the songs but enjoying the ones she did know. She was disappointed that Erik did not sing at all, but she was not surprised. It had been so long since she had heard him sing, and she glanced over, trying to steel herself into asking for a performance sometime soon.

However, to her surprise, he looked tense and agitated, hunched a little, his grip tight and his mouth thin. From what she could see of his eyes, they were narrow and stressed.

"Are you okay?" she said without thinking.

"I am fine," he said shortly.

She paused. "Are you sure? Are you mad at the kitty? Are you tired from driving?"

"I am *fine*," he snapped.

"You're obviously not," she said. "Would you please just tell me what's wrong?"

His lips seemed to tighten even more, and he drummed his long fingers on the wheel for a moment before saying, "It...displeases me that your voice has undergone such...regression."

She sat there, letting the words sink in, and a blush heated her entire face. "I sound bad?"

"No," he said, looking at her quickly for the first time. "No, you are still grace and potential itself. Yet...it is not where it once was." He fell silent and then said suddenly, angrily, "Months of hard work for nothing. Countless wasted hours. Did you sing at all during the past year?"

Knowing instantly that he wouldn't count her volunteer hours at the hospital as actual singing, she simply said, "No."

"That is unacceptable," he said immediately. She could recognize the inflections of his voice changing and knew he was sliding back into his teacher persona. The teacher could say what he wished to her, because he was the master. He did not have to be Erik for her. He could hide behind the teacher and scold her like she was a little girl.

"What was I supposed to do?" she said, shame and sadness and anger all in her. "It didn't feel the same."

"Why is that?"

"Because you weren't there."

"Ah. Perhaps fear inspired your voice to unimaginable heights."

She didn't want him to be so sarcastic about it all when she was trying to be honest. "I'm not afraid of you, Erik."

"That night in that wretched basement would be a testament to otherwise," he said nastily.

A long silence followed, silence that even Copland's music couldn't penetrate. That night was in discussion now, something they had both steadily ignored over the past week. How was she supposed to explain everything to him when it was thrust on her so suddenly?

She tried to gather and express her feelings right then, inadequately-prepared for something so important. "I was...You're right, Erik. I was afraid of you then. But just because...because you wouldn't listen. You were going to kill him. That would scare anyone. But it only lasted a couple minutes. You know...what happened between us." Her blush was bright and hot, and she saw his fingers twitch a little. "I'm not afraid of you now."

"You should be."

Christine wasn't going to justify his stupid response with an answer. She ignored it and stroked the cat a few times, staring out of the window for several long minutes before she said, "I need a bathroom break."

They passed three gas stations before he stopped, flatly claiming that she was likely to be murdered at the others. She wanted to laugh and ask him why she should be afraid of him when he said things like that, but instead she left the car with a promise to be right back.

In the dim light of the bathroom, she stared at her reflection in the mirror. Maybe he was right, though. Maybe she should have been afraid. With everything he had done to her, with the violence he had displayed with Raoul, and then with the recent violence she had seen with Savino, it wouldn't have been a stretch to be afraid of his violence turning on her.

But instead, she ran her fingers through her hair, trying to tame it a little, wanting to look...good for him. Wanting him to think she was pretty. She shook her head, saying to her reflection, "You're a mess." Then she went back out to the car. There was only an hour left until their destination.

She didn't know what was waiting for her at her apartment. But she felt a need to return. And she wanted him with her.

After nearly a year of searching, to see him leave again would be unbearable.

Chapter 28: Chapter 28

She did not sing for the rest of the drive. Perhaps he should not have said anything at all. But he had not been able to help himself. Her voice had regressed so much—it was as if their months of work had never happened. The thought that she had squandered such a gift infuriated him. Did she truly not realize the power and potential of her instrument? Did she wish to hide it away forever, a weak thing, never to fully bloom? He had taught her well enough that she could have continued on her own. Of course, she was still too young to yet reach the full heights of which he knew her voice was capable, but the sound of that lackluster little voice had caused his vision to flash. Had music and singing been ruined for her? Her claims that it '*didn't feel the same without him*' did little to assuage his anger. Perhaps she had been so traumatized, so horrified by him and his actions, that she wasn't able to sing without suffering from flashbacks or associated fear.

The exit for her town finally appeared, and he was grateful for that. Although four hours was not terribly long, it had been difficult to do this in such close proximity to her. Once she had leaned over to adjust the volume of the stereo, and her hair had brushed his arm. That had nearly undone him.

She gave him soft directions to her apartment, and he noticed that she stared out of the window as they drove by her university campus, tightly clutching that wretched cat.

"I stopped going, you know," she said, looking over at him. "Did I tell you already? I went for just a few weeks last fall and couldn't go anymore."

Because of him. He had ruined every aspect of her life. Her music, her education, her relationship with that boy...

She worked on stuffing the mangy animal back into its cage as he pulled up alongside a building that she indicated as hers. He nearly demanded to know whether or not she was joking. It was decrepit and run down. With the money he had given her, she could have afforded anything else in this miserable town. So why had she chosen this horrid little place?

"It's not that fancy," she said, sounding apologetic as she climbed out of the car, stretching her arms over her head, apparently relieved to be out of the car. He, too, felt his stiff muscles and limbs protest and then ease into movement as he pulled their few belongings out, the cat yowling unpleasantly.

She dug through her oversized bag and pulled out a set of keys after a moment, leading the way to a chipped door with the faded number *11* painted on the outside. His lip curled. He could do with horrid conditions easily. He had survived for years in wretched, filthy places. But the thought of *her* in one seemed unjust. She deserved palaces, luxury, softness, every comfort the world could offer.

"I haven't been here in a few weeks," she said, yawning as she unlocked it. "So it's probably going to be a little dusty, just so you know. And...I think I maybe left some dishes in the sink. Oops."

His stomach jumped as she pushed the door open and stepped inside. Feeling clumsy and too large, he awkwardly followed, a musty, old smell assaulting him immediately.

"Ugh," she said, flipping on a light. "It's worse than I thought. I'm sorry."

He wanted to tell her that she should not apologize—how could she have predicted how long she would be away? But he simply watched like an idiot as she moved around, opening old, heavy windows and turning on a fan. Then she grabbed some cleaning supplies and began scrubbing things.

"Christine," he said softly, unable to watch silently anymore. "Do not. It is late. You must sleep."

"But it's gross," she protested, wiping down the battered coffee table.

"It is nothing. It is fine."

She sighed deeply, rubbing her eyes with her fingers, and nodded. "Yeah. You're right. I'm exhausted." She leaned down and let the cat out, and it bolted to a dusty corner and gazed reproachfully at her. He rather wanted to hiss at it.

The apartment was ridiculously small. It was a studio, something which further annoyed him. Why would she pick this place? Had she spent all the money he had given her? He couldn't imagine what she would spend it all on. A trip to London cost less than a quarter million, he was fairly certain. Perhaps she had simply donated it all to charity. He nearly rolled his eyes at the thought. Still, he would have recognized this as her space anywhere. There were her trademark shoes by the door, her picture of her father, her books and magazines littered on the table. Two Friedrich prints were hanging on the wall above the bed. A dead plant was on the small kitchen table as well, its leaves withered and brown.

"It's small, I know," she said, apparently seeing him examining it. "The bathroom is just around this wall, here, if you need it, and..." She suddenly paused, a blush blooming on her cheeks. He shifted uncomfortably, feeling incredibly out-of-place and blundering as she rubbed her forearm, looking at him with an expression he couldn't read.

"There's only one bed," she said at last, her voice nervous. "I'm so sorry. I should have thought of that before..."

"No matter," he said, doing his absolute best to stay calm and not become overwhelmed by the emotions and the fact that he was *here*, in *her* apartment, with *her* after all this time. All at the same time. "There are many hotels nearby."

"I don't want you to have to go to a hotel. I want you to stay here."

He folded his arms. "Then what do you propose? Shall I sleep on the floor?" He would, though. He would do anything she asked. But he could feel his temper rising. He was exhausted as well at this point, and being so close to her for so long was wearing on him. It was important not to let her in. Then what would happen? So he opted for mocking anger. "Or perhaps on your doorstep. Was that your plan, oh benevolent mistress?"

To his horror, he saw tears welling in her eyes. *Wonderful*. Two minutes in her home, and he was already driving her to tears. His heart gave a painful thud.

"I'm sorry," she said, her head bowed. The tears then began to fall, and she was fully crying. "I'm s-sorry. I didn't think this th-through. I should've thought of th-this. I just...wanted you to c-come with me. You're right...I'm so s-sorry..."

Sickened, he moved closer, though he did not attempt to touch her. "No. Please. Do not cry. Please. I am an idiot. I am tired, and I am being cruel to you. You have been...kind to invite me here. Please. Stop crying. I will go wherever you ask me to."

She sniffled for a few minutes, rubbing her eyes again as she calmed herself, and then she glanced up at him at last, her cheeks and nose pink and her eyes bright with tears.

"I'm tired, too," she whispered. "It's been a really long day."

He paused. "It has."

"I'm sorry for being so emotional. I think I'm just..."

"No," he said. "You have done nothing except show me great kindness. I am...honored to be invited to your home."

"Well, it's not very good for two people, apparently." She gave a shuddering sigh and looked around again. Then she frowned. "There's the couch. I guess that will have to do. Maybe I'll think of something better by tomorrow night."

He glanced over at the sofa. It was a nondescript gray color, lumpy, old, and much too small for his long frame. But he would take it, if that was what she was giving to him.

Then, to his general embarrassment and faint unease, she began a domestic routine, pulling down the sheets on the bed and asking him if he had everything he needed.

"Pajamas?" she asked. He gave a vague nod. "Toothbrush?" Again, a nod. "Need some water before you go to sleep?" He shook his head. The whole scene was invasive and entirely too intimate. Just three weeks ago, he was sure he would never see her again. And now he was watching as she pulled out her nightclothes and toothbrush and gave him a small smile as she stepped into the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

The situation threatened to make him panic. The apartment felt too small and constrictive. This was not a place he was familiar with. It was not somewhere he was secure. The door was locked, but that would not keep everything out. And he was supposed to sleep on the sofa. And then what? Tomorrow morning, what would she do? Wake to find him there and thank him for driving her? And he would leave...And then it would be over. The sheer fact that it was all entirely out of his control nearly made him sick. He had to be content to let her decide everything. And she was busily brushing her teeth instead of contemplating this decision.

She returned in a blue summer nightgown. It was one that he had bought for her, over a year ago.

"Bathroom's free," she said simply, smiling, appearing cheerful and tired at the same time.

The bathroom was not much better than the rest of the apartment, small and ugly. Thankfully, the mirror opened to shelving behind it, and he angled it away so that he would not have to look at his face as he slipped off the mask. The skin on his face had been stifled and hot nearly the entire day, and he splashed water onto it, knowing he would have to keep the mask on the rest of the night. Usually he locked himself up in his own room in order to let the skin breathe.

The cupboard behind the mirror was full of ordinary things, and he was, in his own sick, disturbed way, somehow grateful to see the absence of anti-depressants or any other kind of prescription medication. There were painkillers and some dusty, unopened vitamins.

He remained in there for a while longer, simply to avoid putting the mask back on, but when he finally knew he had been in there long enough, he slipped it over his face and left, his skin instantly protesting being shoved away again so quickly.

Taking two steps back into the small apartment, he then paused, instantly confused. Christine was nestled up on the sofa, looking through a magazine. She glanced up at him.

"Those aren't pajamas. You haven't even changed."

He took a step closer. "What are you doing?"

She frowned and looked around the apartment, as if to see what his confusion was about. Then she said hesitantly, "Getting ready for bed...? You're not, apparently. Do you need some pajamas?"

"I need nothing. But you—I..." Perhaps she was merely resting on the sofa for a few moments. Maybe she liked to read for a while before sleeping. He remembered that she stayed up late messaging that boy while she had been with him. She had said she was tired, but apparently she needed time to unwind from the day. So he took a few steps across the room and sat at a kitchen chair.

This time she observed him in confusion. "What are *you* doing?"

"Nothing," he said, rather snappishly. Then he softened his tone considerably. "Nothing."

"Aren't you tired? You said you were. Are there too many pillows for you? I can pull some off the bed. Here..." She slid off the sofa and went to the bed, pulling ridiculous pillow after ridiculous pillow to the floor. "Just tell me how many you want. I know it's silly to have so many."

"No. No, this is fine." He stood and went to the sofa, where there were two pillows and one blanket. She paused and looked over at him before furrowing her delicate brow.

"Wait, Erik—no, *I'm* sleeping on the couch. You're sleeping here." She patted the bed. "Sorry if that wasn't clear."

He could only handle so many turbulent emotions in one day. "No. I will not do that."

"Do what? Sleep here? Why?" She looked embarrassed suddenly. "I know I haven't been here in a few weeks, but the sheets are still clean, and the mattress is really soft..."

"I will not sleep in your bed."

"Why not?" She hugged a pillow to herself.

Did he have to explain everything to her? It was past midnight now, and he could see her eyes drooping with exhaustion. There was no time nor energy for this argument, so he simply repeated himself, "I will not."

"But the couch is way too small for you," she said. "You won't fit."

"Then I will sleep on the floor."

It was the precise wrong thing to say. Her bottom lip trembled, and he had just braced himself to see her tears for the second time that night when she suddenly threw the pillow she had been holding at him. It bounced against him gently.

"Stop doing this!" she said, her voice high-pitched and slightly hysterical. "Will you just stop it, Erik? For one night! Please! I want you to stay here, and I want you to be comfortable! Can't you get that? Can't you just..." She pressed her hands over her face for a moment and took a breath. Then she looked back up at him, her mouth set. "If you're going to sleep on the floor, then so am I."

He could feel his own temper rising. "Don't you dare—"

"I will," she interrupted. "It's stupid that we can both have a place to sleep but you're being just—just—*insufferable* about this. Either you sleep on the bed, or we'll both sleep on the floor."

She somehow looked radiant there, standing in her blue nightgown, her hair falling freely about her shoulders, her lips and jaw set in a way that might have made him laugh during a different time. She was more beautiful than he remembered.

Yet he couldn't. He couldn't contaminate her bed with...*himself*. That was a sacred space to her. How could she so easily invite a monster into it? He sighed, his own eyes throbbing with exhaustion. He would stay in that bed until she was asleep. Then he would get out of it and sleep on the floor for a few hours. That was how it had to be.

She was obviously delighted by his reluctant acceptance, and he had to awkwardly and uncomfortably sit on the bed while she watched. Then he pulled off his shoes and jacket, wishing she would avert her gaze.

"Thank you," she said again, and she settled back down on the sofa. "The couch is pretty comfortable, too, and I can fit just fine. See? It's a lot better this way." She reached up for the switch. "Do you need the light on for anything?"

His voice was soft. "No."

It was switched off, plunging the apartment into darkness. The fan continued to buzz from the corner. "Goodnight, Erik."

He waited several seconds before replying, the word feeling strange and new in his mouth: "Goodnight."

She shifted on the sofa for a few moments before settling, and he could hear her fall asleep within several minutes. It amazed him. How could she? How could she forget so quickly? How could she comfortably sleep in the same room as he? Had she truly forgotten everything that he had done to her? Had she perhaps misunderstood just what Nadir had told her? *He* had no doubt that Nadir's stories had been truthful. She had every cause to run from him, screaming. Yet instead she remained, breathing gently.

The bed was soft, just as she had said. The pillow was imbued with a faint scent of her hair, and he turned his face toward it, clutching it with one of his hands. His eyes would not stay open. He had not felt this tired in a long time. He was perpetually exhausted—a gift from endless nights of nightmares and insomnia—but it had been a while since he had felt he could actually sleep, and sleep well.

He inhaled her scent again and, already half asleep, his hand stretched out to the other side of the bed, as if searching for something—as if she would be there...

The mere thought through his half-conscious mind caused him to sit up quickly, holding both hands to his chest, disgusted with himself. This was dangerous. This was far more than he had expected.

He slid off the bed and stretched out on the floor. It was uncomfortable, but it would do. There was no deliciously-tormenting pillow there to taunt him, no soft blankets to wrap him up in a mocking, delusional embrace. There was only hard, dirty reality.

The mask dug into his forehead uncomfortably, and he shifted for a moment before sighing and letting his eyes drift close. After several minutes, the cat approached and lay beside him, purring, and he pushed it away. It returned, and he hissed at it, sending it running to Christine. Thankfully, she did not wake as the animal jumped onto the sofa and curled up near her feet.

The buzz of the fan lulled him to sleep eventually, and he was not aware of any nightmares for a very long time.

He did not know how long he had slept when a sudden, intense pain to his left hand and two sharp blows to his chest woke him. His eyes flew open, and he gasped, winded by the hard pressure. His hand was throbbing, and he looked around quickly for the assailant.

"What are you doing?"

The voice was enraged.

He blinked, feeling stupid and dazed, and then he was aware of another blow to his shoulder, though this one was much softer.

"Are you sleeping on the floor? *Seriously*? Get up—get up right now!"

He recognized that voice after another moment, and he realized that Christine was sitting next to him, looking furious. It was still dark in the apartment, and he felt his head swim in confusion and pain.

"What is wrong?" he managed to ask after another moment. Was she hurt somehow?

"I got up to use the bathroom and tripped over you!" she snapped. "I fell on you, and it serves you right! You're impossible, and I'm done with this. *Please* just get into the bed and stay there!"

Normally he would not have tolerated being spoken to like this, but he felt a distinct embarrassment creep into him. This late at night, with Christine so enraged, her hair wild with sleep and her nightgown tangled about her legs as a result of her tumble, seemed to tell him that perhaps she was right. His protests from mere hours before left him as he sat up and got into the bed. He could hear her moving as well, and suddenly he felt her small hands on him, pulling the sheets up, though roughly, obviously frustrated. She yanked them to his chest, and he rather wanted to push her away. Instead he remained motionless.

"There," she said, her voice still angry. "Don't you dare leave it." She turned, and the door to the bathroom slammed loudly as she disappeared behind it.

He wondered if he would be able to sleep again, especially as her subtle scent was still wafting up from the pillows and sheets. Yet for some reason, he would rather lie there the rest of the night than leave and upset her again.

She emerged a minute later and whispered sharply, "Are you still in the bed?"

"Yes," he said, annoyed as well.

"Good. Now stay there." And she fumbled her way back to the sofa and was asleep again.

He did not manage to fall back asleep, though he dozed for a while, the pain in his chest and his hand receding as the night wore on. He did not move around much, not wanting to contaminate the rest of the bed. He was extremely aware of her presence, of every sigh and breath and movement from her, across the room on the sofa. Her sleep seemed painless and restful, which confused him. Wouldn't sleeping in the same room as a monster be at least somewhat horrifying? Horrifying enough to cause a lack of deep sleep?

The night stretched on for what felt like an eternity, and at last, for one of the first times in his life, he was grateful when the rays of the sun began to fill the small apartment. He was now allowed to leave the bed, and he would sit at a chair and perhaps read or write until she woke.

As he attempted to climb out of the bed without touching it more than necessary, he lost his balance just slightly and felt his hand pitch forward a little to catch himself, pushing the objects on the nightstand to the floor, and he winced at the muffled sounds, looking quickly over to the sofa. There was no stir from her; she remained undisturbed in her pleasant dreamings.

He managed to extract himself from the sheets and then bent over to collect the fallen items. An empty glass, a cord for her cell phone, balm for her lips, and a book. It was worn and old, and he picked it up carefully, frowning deeply as he grasped it, the weight and feel familiar.

Embarrassment, shock, and slight anger swept over him as he thumbed through it to see the well-read pages of his own personal copy of *Paradise Lost*. He glanced back over at the sleeping girl, his breath coming a bit faster. It was one of the books she had said she had taken. He had meant to take it with him after leaving the city last year, but it had been the one thing forgotten in his haste. Other things had been deliberately left behind in the apartment, evidence for the law enforcement to support her claims of being kidnapped and held against her will. This book, however, was something he had not wanted to forget. And when he hadn't been able to find it upon his return to the city, he had assumed that it had been taken in for evidence, something that had upset him greatly. Of course, he could have picked up another copy somewhere in his travels, yet he had poured himself into this one specifically.

But no. It was here, in his hands, the notations and the folded pages all there. Had she read it? She had to have. She had taken it for a reason. She had quoted it to him. But he did not want to believe that. He wanted to go demand answers from her, but he had to wait until she was awake and alert. In any case, he would be taking the book back. He had sincerely missed it and could only hope that she hadn't pried. The horrors she would see would be her undoing.

He set the book back onto the nightstand and picked up the last few items. A pair of cheap earrings, a hair tie, and a piece of paper, which he glanced at before setting it down. After a moment, he picked it back up.

A letter. To him. *Dear Erik.*

He had had no intention of reading the paper—wanting to respect her privacy—but with the weak sunlight in the apartment, her soft breathing, and the fact that it was addressed specifically to *him*, he could not help himself, and he began to read.

I haven't seen you in about eight months now. It's gone by so fast, but it's also gone by so slowly. I have my own small apartment now, thanks to the money you gave me. It was too much, but it's really helped me do the things I needed to do.

Then this had been written a few months ago, apparently before the entire ordeal with de Rege. He rolled his eyes at her remarks about the money. He would have given her every last cent he had, but he knew she never would have taken it. So he had settled for the tidy sum of two hundred and fifty thousand, hoping it would suffice but knowing nothing ever would.

I talked with Dr. Khan, you know. I think he was a really good friend to you. I hope he was, anyway.

A small, unheard scoff. If his...*relationship* with Nadir was considered a friendship, he was remarkably glad that he had no other friends.

And then he read the next line.

I hope you had friends in your life, because I talked to your mother (yes, I talked to your mother), and besides being a terrible person, she made it sound like you never had friends or never really got to even have a childhood.

She had talked to his...

He read the line again, unbelieving, hoping his eyes had been tricking him, mixing words around that were not there. But it was there. Black and white, ink, in her loopy penmanship. *I talked to your mother (yes, I talked to your mother)...*

His breath was gone, his pulse had disappeared, and he felt something crashing into his chest once again, a horrid feeling, and all at once he was surrounded by screams, by hatred. He was being barraged, beaten by long, perfectly-manicured hands, and he stumbled backward, sightless, attempting to get away from it all.

The nightstand was behind him, and he tripped over it, flinging his arms in front of his face, protecting his mask from being torn off. She used to...

He was blind, and he fell, his elbow crashing into something hard, his head hitting something sharp, the letter crumpled in his hand, burning his skin.

He had not thought of her in so long. Forgetting had been utter bliss. And now *she...she...*

His vision was still hazy, but he continued to clutch the letter, wanting to finish reading it and yet unable to see. There was a sudden warmth by his side and soft pressure on his arm.

"Erik! Are you okay? What happened?"

That voice. Raised and high-pitched in concern, tinged with the thick sound of having just woken up, raw and hoarse from lack of fluids. She needed to drink

more water.

The pressure moved from his arm to his head, and he felt her fingers in his hair. He forced his eyes open and flinched away.

"You're bleeding!" she said, reaching for him once again. "Did you hit your head? What happened?"

He could feel the blood now, warm on his ear, and his head pounded. But he found no strength to care for that. Clumsily, inelegantly, he pulled himself to his feet, away from her, away from the *traitor*. She had conspired, had plotted with that—that woman and had tricked him into coming here in order to laugh at him, to jeer and mock him for his faint hopes that perhaps she had asked him to come because she wanted him there.

But he was not eight years old anymore. He was no longer a helpless child. He would not suffer himself to be treated like a child ever again. He would not...he would not...

"Erik? Wait! What's wrong? What happened?"

Small hands seized his arm again, and he whirled around, his vision flashing again. He could feel the weakness in her grip and hands, instinct telling him that he could throw the girl aside easily, that he could overpower her a hundred times over. He had been too small before, too weak and isolated, but he was no longer a child, and he had grown.

Instinct, however, was quickly beaten down by the foggy realization that it was *Christine* next to him, her eyes wide and worried, still in her nightgown. He could not lay a finger on her.

But she had...

"You..." he hissed insanely, tearing his arm away from her soft fingers. "You—you..."

He had not suffered enough, in her eyes. He had not paid for his crimes against her. And so she had gone for humiliation, wanting his debasement. He felt exposed in ways he never had before, and he wished to crawl into a hole and never emerge.

His entire frame was shaking with rage, and he wanted to leave, to escape this misery, to return to his solitude, where he was alone, yet there was no one there to deride him, to belittle him, to despise him...

When he felt her hands on him again, he had another urge to hurl her aside, to push her away like he should have done earlier to that spoiled, selfish brat of a girl who had been unfortunate enough to have been his mother. *His mother*. Horrid repressed memories threatened to overwhelm him again.

Is that ink on the ceiling? You miserable little wretch!

Your father is home for the week so you had better mind that ugly mouth of yours unless you want the beating of your life. No music—nothing! Just be quiet!

If you say one word to Henri about the man from last week I will lock you in a dumpster and let you freeze to death!

Of course that had not stopped him—such threats had ceased to scare him long ago. And even as a young as he was, he had taken childish, vindictive, selfish pleasure in listening to the screaming arguments that had resulted from Henri discovering his young wife's infidelity. *He* had not taken as much pleasure in the beating that followed immediately after the argument and had not been able to sit properly for over a week.

Warm contact with his skin abruptly brought him back to the present, and his vision cleared enough to see wide blue eyes, flushed cheeks, trembling pink lips.

"Erik, please," Christine whispered. "You're scaring me...Please. Tell me what's wrong!"

Wordlessly, he stepped away from her and dropped the paper onto the floor, staring at the wall, waiting. Waiting for her scorn. She picked it up and smoothed it out, squinting for a moment. Her eyes widened then.

"Oh." Her own voice was breathless. "Oh. I forgot that I...I should stop doing this..." After a long, silent moment, her warm fingers returned and gently grasped his own. He pulled away. He did not want her to trick him with kindness when he knew the truth. The belittlement would come. The hate. And the mockery. He deserved every unkind word that fell from her lips. After his crimes, his sins against her, she had the right to do whatever she wished to him. He could not touch her. He could not be angry.

"I wrote this months ago," she said at last. "I thought it would help me. But things have changed since then."

Several long moments of silence followed. He could feel that wretched cat at his ankles, weaving in and out, and he resisted the urge to scream—he wanted to be *left alone*.

"Why," he finally managed to ask, his voice without tone, without depth, a hollow, empty sound. "Why *her*."

"Her? Your...mom, you mean? Oh." A long pause. "I wanted to tell you later, when the time was right. It was just..." Obviously undeterred, her hands returned to his, giving a gentle tug. "Can we sit down? It's early. I can make us breakfast. And then we can talk. Please?"

This time, he allowed her to lead him to the small kitchen area and push him into a hard chair, wishing for the torture to be over with as quickly as possible.

"Oh, no!" she said as she put a plate and mug in front of him. "My basil died."

The plant he had seen the night before was still there, withered and beyond saving.

She boiled water and gave him tea, a horrid flavor from some cheap packet. He let it grow cold as she bustled around the small kitchen, frowning and making occasional comments.

"Of course all my stuff is bad...Hmm. I have pancake mix. Do you like that? I don't know what else we can have...Most everything is past the expiration date. I guess it's pancakes, then. I'll have to go grocery shopping today. You'll need to tell me what you like to eat. I'm not even sure..."

And within ten minutes, there was hot food on his plate. The smell made him nauseous.

She sat across from him and glanced up, her expression a curious mixture of emotions he could not quite discern. A blush was resting on her cheeks.

He had calmed himself to numb indifference then, the emotions pushed deep down, in a place where they would no longer blind him. His mother. Christine had seen his mother. There. That was it. It was horrendous. And it had been done. Now that he had admitted it to himself, had acknowledged it, nothing more could surprise him. She could not tear him down if he already knew.

She ate for a while, and he was relieved that she did not comment on his untouched food and drink. Then she pulled her own tea closer and rubbed her eyes.

"I'm really sorry I didn't tell you sooner," she then said, looking at him again. He remained silent. "I should have. I know. But I was...nervous that you would be angry with me."

An understatement, one that he allowed to pass by without comment, wishing for her to continue without interruption.

She drank some of her tea and pushed her curls away from her face, glancing out of the window. "Erik, you don't know how confused I was after...what happened between us. I thought that maybe knowing *you* better would help. I went back to your apartment in New York first, like I already told you. There wasn't a lot, but I found Dr. Khan, and he told me about your time in Iran. Then I found...Madeleine. There was a picture of her..." She stood and went to the bed, picking up the book and returning it, holding it out to him. "I found this in your apartment."

He took it wordlessly, setting it aside.

"Madeleine was in Paris," she said, sitting again. "And she's...she's awful, Erik."

"You think I am not aware of that?" he snapped suddenly, unable to control himself. He did not want a lecture on this or her pity. "You think I do not know exactly what sort of person my...*mother* is? A lecherous, disgusting social climber."

"What do you mean?"

He sneered. The memory of his harsh, beautiful mother, always out of reach, never allowing him to... "She married Henri for his money and connections and was all too eager for his death when it finally happened some years later."

She paused and appeared troubled by this. "Yeah, she...didn't seem too upset about that."

"No. I doubt she would be." He felt sick and wondered if he should stop, but she had already discovered so much, and if she wished to see the broader scope of his monstrosity—including his origins—then how could he stop her now, when she had gone to such lengths to discover it all for herself? Perhaps learning this would be the final blow, the final piece of the puzzle that would complete such a grisly picture, and she would at last understand what he was. "They both had a long string of affairs leading up to his death. She never really cared for him."

"Then...why did they get married in the first place?" she said, her delicate features shocked, as if she had never considered the possibility of unhappy, selfish marriages.

"He was smitten with her, the idiot," *he* spat. "In the beginning...Well. You've seen her. She can be as charming and alluring as she wishes to be. And I believe he still cared deeply for her, those first few years. But my birth and time changed it quickly."

Bitterness rose up in his throat, coating his mouth and tasting vile on his tongue. *He* had always despised his...father. Even as a child, when he had begun to understand and perceive the nature of their relationship, he had been repulsed by the graying, tall, tired-looking man whom he saw perhaps a few times a year—those days being certain holidays and his birthday. How could Henri have allowed himself to fall for Madeleine's deceptions? Perceptive and quick, with nothing else to do, *he* had reasoned to himself, in his own, childlike ways, that she must have ensnared him somehow. And still as a young boy, *he* had sworn to himself to never allow that to happen to him by any woman.

And his own snare sat in front of him, looking tearful and apologetic, her curls enticing, her eyes luminous, her hands, slender and perfect, resting around her cup. She was wearing the bracelet he had given her last year. He wondered why. Perhaps to mock him.

He had also hated his father for marrying someone so much younger than himself, and yet Christine sat before him, at least fifteen years his junior. It was better than forty years, yet he still...

He had become his own father, had become everything he had despised.

After another moment, her hands began to slide over the table, closer to his own, and he pulled his away, hiding them underneath the table. Why did she continually try to touch him?

There was a slight blush on her cheeks, and she said softly, "I'm so sorry for what happened to you as a child. No one deserves that."

"Monsters do."

"Oh, Erik."

A long moment of silence passed between them. "Do you like my hair?" she suddenly asked, her blush brighter on her cheeks.

"I beg your pardon?" he said, unsure if he had understood her correctly.

"I mean...the way it's cut," she said, sounding flustered. She pulled it in front of her shoulders and tugged on the curls. "Do you like it?"

He felt embarrassment creeping up in him again, though this time he did not know why. But she had never asked him a question such as this, and he did not know the correct way to answer. Honesty? Or did she wish for something else? Did she sincerely want to be reminded of the fact that he still worshiped her?

So he said haltingly, feeling stupid, "It is...fine."

"It's not...a bad style?"

He watched her, slightly suspicious but not knowing what else to say. "It is fine."

There was silence for a while longer, and then she cleared her empty plate, frowning at his untouched food but saying nothing. She bent down to stroke the cat a few times, cooing at it softly, and then she turned to him.

"Are you going to let me clean you up a little? The cut looked pretty bad."

"I can do it myself," he said, immediately uncomfortable once again.

"I know," she said evenly. "But I want to. It's my bed that cut you open, after all."

And so he silently allowed her to collect a few meager supplies, rubbing alcohol and cotton. Her injuries here obviously did not consist of more than the occasional scrape or bruise.

The cut itself pounded dully, though experience told him that it was minor. If needed, he could allow it to go untreated and still be perfectly fine. However, Christine seemed adamant, and she poured alcohol onto the cotton and reached out, her fingers burying into his hair.

Immediately, he pulled away and threw his hands up.

"I cannot," he said, breathing deeply. "No."

"Let me do it," she pleaded. "Just really quick. Please. It won't take long, and I feel like you wouldn't even take care of it if I didn't."

Slowly, he sat back up, holding his breath. He felt the tips of her fingers against his scalp and nearly convulsed again, his hands curling into fists on the tabletop. The rubbing alcohol was nothing but a mild sting, and he sat stiffly, silently, waiting for the seconds to pass so that this torture would be over. It was too much for one morning. Too much for one lifetime for him.

She dabbed at the cut, and then he felt her wipe up the blood on his ear.

"There," she said with finality, giving him a small smile. "Not the end of the world, see?"

No. But it had been close.

Chapter 29: Chapter 29

He kept avoiding her eye, and it was becoming almost a game to her, to see how long he could get away with staring at the table. On another night, she might have been hurt and offended that he refused to look at her. But that evening, she thought it was funny. And kind of endearing. So she sat there and smiled at him, listening as Dr. Khan's voice rang out from the phone, telling her about his last-minute holiday to Mallorca. He had just gotten back earlier that day.

"Terribly crowded and noisy," Dr. Khan said. "I've no idea what possessed me to go. I had the same experience four years ago, and nothing has changed. Perhaps next year I'll be more reasonable and go to Crete or Algarve."

Christine could only imagine how much this idle chit chat irritated and bored Erik. His fingers were curled slightly on the tabletop, stiffly and unnaturally placed, and she briefly wondered what he would do if she put her hand over his.

"Did you at least get a nice tan?" Christine then teased, and Dr. Khan laughed a little. The phone had been put on speakerphone at Erik's insistence.

"Not in the least. I hid in my room and watched terrible sci-fi movies. Might as well have stayed home and saved myself the money."

Dr. Khan then asked how things were going 'across the pond,' and she gave him a very edited, shortened, and optimistic version of what had happened since he had left, more for Erik's sake than anything. Christine didn't bother to mention that inviting Erik to her apartment was maybe the best and the worst decision she could have made.

For one thing, Erik was there with her, after nearly a year of searching. But...he was *there with her*. In her apartment. In her tiny studio apartment. And he was going stir crazy.

She didn't tell Dr. Khan that she was growing increasingly scared that Erik would simply leave. Anxiety had begun to choke her, and so she had started to trail after him just like the cat did, not wanting him to leave her sight. She had gone grocery shopping a few times, and each time she left she made Erik promise that he would still be there when she got back. Although she believed him, she would always break into a half-run when she got close to her apartment and throw open the door to see if he had left or if he had stayed. And he was always there, lessening her anxiety just a little. But then it would start to increase again as she thought of the fact that he might leave sometime soon.

Also left out in her brief report to Dr. Khan was the fact that Erik had recently threatened to murder someone and that it had made her sick to her stomach.

She had returned to the insurance office one afternoon, not to ask for her job back, but to apologize, and was then treated to a very long, very stern lecture by her supervisor of how unprofessional it all had been, and how she had better get her act together if she wanted to get anywhere in the insurance world, and that she needn't bother putting him down as a reference for future jobs because he wouldn't have very good things to say about her.

When she told Erik about it all that evening, he had declared that he was going out straightaway to kill him.

"Erik, no!" she had said. "I couldn't care less what he thinks about me. I just went in to make myself feel better."

But she must have looked worried, because Erik gloomily told her later that he hadn't killed anyone since Iran and was not looking to fall back into old habits. It made her feel a little better, but she was still squeamish about the whole subject. So she could only hope that he wouldn't bring it up again.

Christine also refrained from confessing to Dr. Khan about her worries and fears that Erik was bored with her and her company. The apartment was small, and there was hardly anywhere for him to go or things for him to do. Her small television was no good for entertainment. He told her outright that he hated it, and then, after a while, he had grudgingly admitted that there had been a television in the basement with him where he had been kept as a boy, obviously a means to distract and entertain him and keep him quiet and subdued.

"I smashed it when I was eight," he had said tonelessly. "Madeleine was furious."

In an obvious attempt to keep himself busy, he had taken to fixing things around the apartment; a window that had been stuck shut, a flickering light in the kitchen, the creaking front door, the funny noise the refrigerator made when the sink was running...She wasn't sure if he knew the first thing about home repair, but she didn't doubt that he could do it.

But Christine did tell Dr. Khan about the guitar. "He's been playing it nonstop," she said, hoping her tone would encourage Erik to enter the conversation and participate, but he remained stoic, sitting, staring down, only an occasional twitch in his hand to let her know that he was even aware of what was happening.

"He's a genius with it, of course," Christine said. "I'm sure he still prefers piano and violin, but he makes me jealous." That was an understatement. The first time he had played it, she had nearly snatched it away, not wanting to listen. Wasn't there *anything* she could do better than he could? Guitar had been *her* instrument. But he had picked it up easily and played in a way that made her burn with envy. He had asked for her help only once—to find a capo for him.

In the end, though, she couldn't really begrudge him for it. He needed an outlet. And if that was what got him to stay, then...

However, when she and Dr. Khan started to talk about the weather and the storm clouds she had seen earlier, she could tell that his patience was finally starting to wear. He cleared his throat and tapped his fingers on the table, looking at her at last, a telling glance that she had better get to the point, and soon.

"Anyway, Dr. Khan," she said as a response. "About my fingers..."

"Oh, yes. You've not been straining them too much?" He asked about the pressure and flexibility, and she was thrilled when he said at last, *"It sounds like the splint can be removed. Have Erik do it. Just be careful. And send me a picture of your fingers after it's off."*

She held out her hand and felt a light blush spread across her cheeks as he wrapped his long fingers around her wrist to hold her hand steady. Gently, he peeled off the bandage and removed the splint, and she wiggled her newly-freed fingers. They were still a little sore, but the pain was nowhere near what it had been, and she felt as if taking off the splint was like finally freeing herself of the trauma of what had happened to her. The last physical reminder was gone. Weight was lifted off of her.

Dr. Khan asked her to move her fingers in certain ways and describe any pain or other unfamiliar sensations. She did so, but they seemed to have healed well.

"They weren't technically broken," Dr. Khan said after she told him that. "Just a severe sprain, more likely. Still send me a picture, though, so I can see if there is any unusual bruising."

Christine pushed the phone over to Erik and held out her hand for the picture. "Would you take it?" she asked. "Oh—3745. That's the passcode to get into the phone."

Erik picked it up and made a strange, soft sound in his throat that sounded like a laugh and a sigh, but he ignored her questioning look and instead took a picture of her hand and sent it. There was a pause on the other end, and then Dr. Khan said,

"They look fine, and if you're not feeling any pain, then I think the splinter can be left off permanently. Remember to be careful with them these next few days."

Apparently satisfied, Erik stood and returned to the couch and the guitar. She turned the phone off speakerphone and chatted with Dr. Khan for only a couple more minutes. Thanking him one more time and promising to call or text right away if there was any unusual pain, she said goodbye and that she hoped to talk to him again soon.

It felt peaceful in the apartment. The weak sunshine from that day had faded away into a gray storm, and a wet summer downpour pattered on the sidewalks and rooftops. They were both quiet, and she somehow sensed that he was doing some thinking and reflecting. He fiddled with the guitar for a while, but she could see that he wasn't focused, and he set it aside soon after. She watched him out of the corner of her eye, as she often did, afraid he would disappear if she looked away too long. He read from one of her old textbooks, a horrible chemistry one that she had never actually opened, but judging by the way his eyes stared at the same spot on the page, he wasn't really reading or absorbing anything. Christine was glad that there weren't any more secret, revealing letters lying around for him to find. She had thrown out the one he had found and was grateful that he hadn't mentioned it since.

She did feel guilty for not telling him earlier that she had found and seen Madeleine, but...she had been afraid that he would have been angry and would have left her. He had a right to know, and she was aware of that. However, besides the comment about the television, he had not mentioned Madeleine to her at all since and she, hoping it was right, simply followed his lead.

As evening fell fully, she turned on some lights and went to the kitchen to make something sweet, knowing he wouldn't eat it but wanting to anyway. She continued to glance at him as she baked. He was jotting down some annotations in a couple of her old music books, the cat purring on the seat next to him, as close as it could get without Erik hissing at it. He had started to call it '*petit diable*,' and she was able to pick up quickly enough what that meant.

She smiled a little to herself as she reached for the pan in the oven and then pulled away quickly.

"Ouch!"

Lost in thought and distracted, she had accidentally burned two fingers on the hot pan. They throbbed, and she quickly stuck them under cold water, wincing a little.

"Have you hurt yourself?"

He was up and in the kitchen, close to her to see.

"It's fine," she said, forcing a smile onto her lips. "I was being stupid and got distracted. It's just a little burn."

Wordlessly, he held out his hand, and she glanced at him before turning off the water and putting her injured fingers in his palm. The burn was already bright pink. Erik ran his bony thumb over the skin, and she crunched up her face to express the discomfort.

"Sit down," he said, his voice soft, and she did so on the sofa. She heard him in the kitchen for a moment before he returned with a clean damp washcloth that smelled slightly like vinegar. For a moment, it looked like he struggled to find a position—bending over was ridiculous, and she knew he wouldn't just sit on the ground. In the end, he sighed a little and knelt in front of her. His legs were very long and required a moment of adjusting. She gave him her hurt fingers again, and he gently pressed the cool, damp cloth to the small burn. After a few minutes, the stinging sensation went away. It still throbbed dully, but the edge had been taken off.

"Wow," she said quietly. "Thanks. That feels a lot better." She gave him a smile. "Now my fingers will have to be wrapped *again*. It hasn't even been an hour since my splint came off."

"This burn is very minor. You will be fine without any sort of bandage."

So much for a joke. Still, she continued to smile. His skin felt cold, and she looked at the back of his bony hands, seeing the blue veins running across it; his pale skin seemed translucent. His knuckles protruded sharply, and if she looked hard, she could see thin white lines across them. They were old scars.

After a few more minutes, she thanked him for the help, feeling awkward with him simply kneeling and holding a cloth to her fingers, something she could do without assistance. He nodded and stood, and she continued to watch him as he returned to the music. She threw the burned dessert away, feeling like it had betrayed her somehow, and opened a few windows to let the cool, rain-drenched air blow away the lingering smell of burned food.

She played with the cat for a while, teasing it with a little toy of a feather tied to some string, and she giggled as it leapt up and rolled over, pawing at the feather. It was too bad that Erik didn't like the kitty. She was only thankful that he was still here despite his obvious dislike for it. Christine couldn't help but wish that she knew more of what he actually liked instead of all the things he didn't. Tickling the cat's belly and laughing as it gently and playfully bit and pawed at her fingers, she tried to think. Erik liked music. And Dr. Khan. And black clothing. And...her. She blushed a little and glanced over at him. He was reading again.

There was something else he obviously liked, and after another minute she worked up the nerve to ask.

"Erik?"

He looked up from the page, his eyes intense. His unwavering attention still made her blush a little. She sat back, and the cat climbed into her lap, kneading her leg and giving a little meow. Gathering it into her arms, Christine stroked the soft gray fur and then said, "You know that book? *Paradise Lost*?"

She could tell he was raising an eyebrow. "You are perfectly aware that I know that book."

Her blush deepened a bit. She continued, "Yeah. Well, I was just wondering why you like it so much."

He paused for a few moments, tapping his long fingers on the arm of the sofa, looking like he was unsure how to respond. Finally, he said, "You read it, didn't you?"

"Um. Not really." She shrugged. "Parts of it. Not the whole thing, though."

"Well, then perhaps you would only understand its appeal if you had read it in its entirety." And he went back to his book. The cat wiggled out of her arms and went to meow at his ankles.

She was tempted to be offended, and she was for a few moments, standing up without a word and stalking to the bathroom to get ready for bed. But as she brushed her teeth, she realized that maybe the question had been too personal at this stage in their relationship. Some of the passages that she had read from it during his absence had seemed like little glimpses into his soul, small windows into a mind that was still trying to block her out. Maybe she would read it all, though. She could pick up her own copy from a bookstore and commit herself to finishing it. It would be an easy thing to do to better understand the man she needed to understand.

Christine slept for only a couple hours that night before waking abruptly, uncomfortable on the couch for the first time. She felt awake and alert, and she lay there for a long time, staring into the darkness, straining to hear his silent breathing, to make sure he was still there. The clock on the wall ticked quietly, and she could hear the cat purring softly nearby. The rain filled the apartment with a wet, fresh scent.

She rolled over and sighed softly, pressing a hand over her eyes, thinking, her mind always returning to the horrible idea of Erik leaving. He had done so much more than she had expected. He had done things he hadn't wanted to, just for her, but she knew after experience that he had a limit. There was only so far he could go without breaking. What would it be this time? To go through everything with her, to have loved her so much, to have nearly killed in order to marry her, and then to have let her go...What would it be like now? If he left, would it be like that night all over again? She would never forget his expression after that second kiss, the tears, and she knew she couldn't go through it again. Neither could he.

Another sigh echoed around the room, and she tensed a little.

"Erik?" she whispered, so softly she could barely hear herself. There was no reply, which meant that he either hadn't heard her, was ignoring her, or was actually asleep. He always woke before she did, and after what happened that first night here, she was upset at the thought that maybe he still slept on the floor, but any half-asleep midnight trips to the bathroom were always free of long, lanky bodies tripping her, so she could only hope that he stayed in the bed.

Trying to be careful and quiet, she sat up and peered through the darkness toward the bed. "Erik?" she tried again, just a little louder. There was still no answer, and so she pulled the blanket off of her and stood, the couch squeaking slightly as she did.

The streetlamps filtered in through the thin curtains, and that, combined with the nightlight that was in the bathroom, gave her just enough light to see. She tiptoed over, holding her breath. If he was awake, she could use the bathroom as an excuse.

An orange strip of light from the streetlamp splashed onto the foot of the bed, and it rose and fell over his long legs, tucked beneath a sheet. One bony hand was resting on his midsection, and his other arm was curled above his head, which was tilted to the right slightly. His eyes were closed, and he was breathing deeply, softly.

His mask had been set to the side.

The sight was powerful. She paused, staring, and then sank to her knees beside the bed, watching, unable to look hard enough, long enough. Of course she knew he had to sleep *sometime*. He knew he had to sleep sometime as well. But...it was so unreal, so touching, so intimate. A few buttons at the top of his shirt were undone, and the sheet was pulled up to his thin waist, obviously there for comfort more than for warmth.

For the first few minutes, she was nervous that his eyes would open and he would demand to know why she was kneeling beside the bed, staring, but the minutes ticked on, and he continued to sleep quietly. She wanted to touch his hand, his collarbone, his neck, his cheek, his lips, but any contact would undoubtedly wake him, so she had to be content with simply watching. There was a soft rustle as the cat jumped up onto the bed and stretched out near his feet, apparently deciding that if Christine was safe there, then it was as well.

The floor grew hard and unforgiving against her knees. She knew that trying to sit on the bed would wake him up, so she shifted to fully sit on the floor and, very carefully and slowly, rested her arms and head against the mattress next to him, watching him to be sure that he didn't stir. It was hard to imagine that the same man who had done so much, who had killed people, stolen, trapped her, nearly killed the man she had loved, was also the man who was sleeping before her, still, quiet, and serene. He was volatile. He was angry. But he also looked fragile and vulnerable here, and she felt a sudden strong urge to climb into the bed and wrap him in her arms. She fought it back quickly and contented herself with watching him there, as if he would disappear if she looked away.

She already knew she couldn't have him leave. That choking sensation in her chest and throat said so at the mere thought. But if he couldn't leave, then what? He wouldn't want to stay here while she played house with him, while she awkwardly tried to insert him into her apartment as some sort of object that she kept moving around, seeing where it fit and then deciding that maybe it looked better somewhere else. He was just too much for that.

Releasing a second small sigh, she closed her eyes. The stillness and tranquility of the moment felt nice.

Christine had told herself repeatedly during the past year that she did not want to see him again, that it was for the best that they were apart, that it would be too difficult to see him. Now that she had, now that he was with her again, she realized, sitting there in that quiet room, that all of those things she had told herself were lies. She had wanted him back desperately but hadn't let herself admit it, convinced that it was somehow wrong of her to want it.

Her last thought for a while was that the therapist definitely wouldn't have recommended this.

Sharp pain brought her back into consciousness, her neck aching and her backside sore from sitting on the floor for so long. She gave a muffled groan in her arm and then opened her eyes, blinking blearily at the pale sunshine on the sheets in front of her.

The empty sheets.

She blinked again and then immediately sat up, her neck protesting and making an unpleasant *cracking* sound as she did so, and she winced and rubbed it, panicking.

"Erik? Erik!"

Her fears overwhelmed her, and she felt physically sick at the thought that he had left, that he had snuck out and hadn't said goodbye, that she would never see him—

"What is it?"

Her neck was tight and painful as she turned around quickly, though there was nothing but relief as she saw him standing there in his shirtsleeves, watching her with slight confusion.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, one of her chipped mugs in his long hands.

"No—no, I just thought..." She grabbed the bed to help her clamber to her feet, stiff and sore all over from spending most of the night on the floor.

He eyed her suspiciously. "I did not wish to wake you," he said. "Though perhaps I should have. Do you require a hot compress for your neck?"

She rubbed it again and decided against shaking her head, saying instead, "No, it'll be fine. Thank you." There was inexplicable, overwhelming relief seeing him there, knowing she still had at least one more day with him.

"You should have some tea, at any rate," he said, turning back to the kitchen, and she felt her lips tug into a small smile as she went over to see the two steaming mugs. A newspaper was spread over one side of the small table, and he resumed his seat as well and picked it up, disappearing behind it. She had a suspicion that he was stealing them from her neighbor; it wasn't as if she had any papers delivered here. But she wasn't very upset about it. The newspapers always sat on the sidewalk for weeks and grew soggy and moldy before being thrown away, not once read or even picked up.

She filled a bowl with fresh water and food for the cat (giggling inwardly at the thought of *'petit diable'*) and set it down before sitting across from him, pulling her mug closer. There was silence for a while, but it didn't feel awkward. It was a morning silence, a still-sleepy, occasional-yawning kind, and she let the tea wake her up a little as she stared out of the window, her eyes adjusting to being open. The day was already warm and bright, the storm having disappeared in the early hours of the morning.

"Anything interesting?" she asked a few minutes later.

He glanced at her over the top of the paper and said, "There is always something interesting happening in the world."

She made a face at him and joked, "Oh, *very* specific, thank you."

His eyes softened, and she could see his mouth twitching a little. Her heart fluttered.

He didn't bring up the fact that she had slept at his bedside, and Christine suspected it was more a way to protect himself than anything. Ignoring it meant they wouldn't have to talk about it, would spare him any embarrassment, and would mean that he could pretend she hadn't seen his face. She didn't mind, though. It felt like something sacred, an experience just for her that would lose its meaning if she talked about it.

The day turned out to be as quiet as the night previously. She mechanically made food throughout the day, always putting it beside him wordlessly. He barely touched it. She did laundry and paid some bills. He fixed her closet door in the afternoon, and she tried to help, but mostly she just stood to the side and admired him, his long arms and legs and the wide expanse of his back. When it was dinnertime, she turned on some quiet music, hoping it would help him relax. The windows were still open, a tempting summer breeze drifting through, fresh and clean from the rain. As soon as it was sufficiently dark, she went to him. He was sitting on the couch, playing the guitar, and she picked up the cat that was sleeping next to him and put it on her lap after she sat down.

He stiffened and seemed to increase his concentration on the guitar, obviously doing his best to ignore her.

"Do you want to go out tonight?" she asked loudly, trying to be heard over the steel strings. "Like on a walk or something. There are a lot of paths near here. It's supposed to be a nice evening."

He didn't stop playing as he said, "Someone will see."

"No," she said. "There's no one there after dark. It goes through some woods, and people are too scared. Please? We should celebrate my recovery." She wiggled her fingers again.

"If you wish to go, you should," he said, beginning to play even faster. "But it is unwise to take chances of being seen with me."

"What would be wrong with that?" She wanted him to stop playing and look at her. "Erik?" He continued to play, not answering, and she, with a little more force than she meant, reached up and grabbed the neck of the guitar, cutting off the strings and forcing him to stop and look at her, his jaw clenching in annoyance.

"I know you're sick of being cooped up in here," she said. "And there's not...a lot to do, I know. I want you to come with me. We can go to my favorite path. It's really pretty."

"I am not good company for evening strolls..."

She could hear his resolve wavering slightly, probably desperate himself to get out of the apartment for a while, so she pressed one more time. "You're perfect for evening strolls. Please?"

After one more moment deliberation, he sighed in an annoyed sort of way. "Fine."

She smiled in response and went to gather her things. She might have felt bad that she was forcing him to go with her, but she saw him waiting by the door while she was tying her shoes, flexing his fingers and glancing at her a few times, as if nervous she would change her mind.

Unable to hide another smile, she stood and led the way out the door.

***Chapter 30*: Chapter 30**

The night was warm, like she had promised it would be, and the air grew clean as she led the way closer to the walking path. He could feel a tightness in his shoulders that would soon ache if he did not relax the muscles. But it was difficult to do so. Out on some sidewalk with her, walking on a path next to a park, drawing close to a wooded area that loomed over them.

He soon noticed someone quickly approaching on the other side of the street, and he paused, feeling his frame seize up. His hands clenched into tight fists. Christine stopped as well and looked up at him before discovering what it was that was disturbing him. An intruder. Someone coming to attack. He took two steps back, unsure of what to do. He could not disappear and leave Christine alone. But he could not simply stand there and let the disastrous event unfold and ruin everything.

"She's just jogging, Erik," Christine then said quietly, looking back up at him.

"She will see me. She will scream and call the police."

"It's too dark for her to see us, and she's on the other side of the road. And look—she's got headphones in. She doesn't even notice us."

He could feel his fingers twitching toward the lining of his jacket where the lasso lay. The woman came even closer, and he took another step backward before a soft, warm hand on his arm stopped him.

"Don't go," Christine said, her voice pleading. "Please. Nothing will happen, I promise. Just stay here. Please."

He wanted to demand why she had insisted on coming out that evening when he had specifically *told* her that someone would see him, that it was not wise to take chances when dealing with this matter. He wanted to tell her that she was a stupid, naive girl for making such absurd promises and that she knew nothing of the world. But instead he paused and closed his eyes, his heart thudding loudly in his rib cage, waiting for the screams, the sirens...

The woman's heavy footsteps grew a bit louder and then soon faded away.

"See?" Christine said. "She didn't even know we were here." Her hand returned to his arm. "The path starts just over here. Will you still come? Please?"

His shoulders were still tense, hunched, and he gave her a glance, seeing her smiling face, her skin luminous from the few streetlamps, and he followed. He was unable to resist when she was so beautiful. She could have led him into a cage, a cell, a pit, and he still would have worshiped her and followed her.

"Why would that woman be out alone so late?" he grumbled a few moments later, determined to be irritated.

"This is a safe town," she said.

"Not anymore."

She did not respond to that, but he heard her sigh slightly.

The path was winding and even. He could faintly hear a busy highway to the west and a stream somewhere close by. He had been fascinated with nature as a child, undoubtedly from being locked in a basement for so many years, but that fascination had faded somewhat with the years. Nature and the elements had made almost as many attempts on his life as mankind. He had almost frozen to death that first year after leaving Madeleine's basement, and he still remembered that moment of delirious weakness when he had wanted to return to Paris and to that basement prison where at least it was warm and he had been fed.

It was apparent that Christine had had no such traumatic experiences. She was clearly enjoying herself, smiling widely and chatting to him absentmindedly, telling him about the baby fox she had seen in the spring and the owls she heard sometimes.

She then told him a story about how she had slipped on ice earlier that year and had slid down a small hill, nearly knocking out a tooth on the gravel walkway, and her gestures as well as her own laughter caused him to laugh softly as well. She looked up at him, and he could see a blush on her cheeks and a smile on her lips. He still did not fully understand how she could smile at him after everything he had done to her. How she could invited him into her home. How she could continually ask him to stay.

Something brushed up against his hand, and he looked to see her fingers there, sliding through his.

Immediately, he pulled away, stopping short. Christine paused as well, looking up at him in confusion, the smile gone.

"What are you doing," he said harshly, though there was no question in his words. It was a command.

"I was just..." She trailed off, looking at her shoes.

"Just what?" Frustration and confusion made his voice harsh, made his emotions raw. He did not want to hurt her, not truly, but her touch grated him.

"I just wanted to hold your hand," she said softly, glancing at him.

"Why?"

"Well...we've held hands before," she said.

He knew that. He was perfectly aware of that. He could still feel her soft fingers against his skin, a brush of a fingernail as she touched him. "Why?"

"Because—because people usually hold hands when...when they go for walks."

"No. Tell me why you touched me."

Her chin trembled. His heart lurched again, but he did not retract his words. Perhaps now would be the time. Perhaps now she would finally tell him that she was ready for him to leave, to continue on with her life. And wasn't this what he had been waiting for this whole time? He had played this game with her for several days now and had let himself become wrapped up in it, in this charade of normalcy. But it could not continue.

"Erik, can we talk about this later?" she softly pled.

"No." If she was going to tell him to leave, she would do it here. If they returned to her ridiculous apartment, he would become ensnared by her again. He would fall into her trap and play some sick imitation of life with her for as long as she let him. "You continually touch me. These past few days, you..." A pause, and then he said, "If it is pity, then I would rather not be touched at all."

"It's not pity!" she said instantly, her voice cracking.

"Then what is it, Christine?" he snapped. "*What is it?* What am I doing here? Why did you insist that I come? Why am I—am I sleeping in your bed? Why did you ask me to stay with you and not simply take you to a hospital? Why did you not marry that boy? Why are you still here? *Why are you doing this?*"

His last question was shouted, and Christine started slightly, looking at him with wide, pleading eyes. He was going to drown in them if he was not careful, and so he continued, "I left you to your happiness a year ago! And you did not even want *that*. You are impossible to please. You are a selfish child who does not know what she wants."

A long pause followed, and a warm breeze fluttered through the trees. He could see it blowing her curls and wondered if he would ever touch them again. Perhaps it would be his one regret before he died; that he never ran his fingers through Christine Daae's hair.

It took her several moments, but she then said, her voice trembling slightly, "I've told you what I want. I wanted you to come with me and stay in my apartment. I wanted to help you when you fell. I wanted to come on this walk with you. I want to—to hold your hand. I've told you all of this."

"Yet you still refuse to tell me the reason why."

"I think you know the reason," she replied. "You know the reason, but you won't admit it to yourself. Dr. Khan told me once that you're good at knowing what people's intentions are. So you know I'm not doing this to...to trick you or hurt you."

He was silent. Then he murmured, "No. No, you are not malicious. You have always been more than I deserve."

"Don't say that," she said.

"Why?" he said, a hard, cruel edge back in his voice. "It is the truth, and since you searched so diligently for the truth, it would be unfair to deprive you of it any longer. I have ruined you. I have committed heinous crimes against you. And yet here you are before me, too sweet and blind and trusting to recognize the truth."

"I'm not stupid, Erik," she said. "I heard everything Dr. Khan said. I know what Madeleine did to you. And...and *I* was the one hurt by Savino. I know what you've done. I know what you did to me last year. And it was not okay."

He clenched his jaw and turned away. Did she think he was not aware of that? Did she think he did not know perfectly well that what he had done to her was unacceptable in every sense? Did she think that it did not torment him to know this and still let himself be in her presence?

Before he could move or stop her, he felt her hand reach over and grasp his tightly, and he pulled slightly but did not break her grip.

"*But*," Christine continued, her voice steady, "you did more for me than anyone else. You let me go last year. You let me go. And if I hadn't asked you to stay, you would be gone. You would have let me go again. And that's more important to me than what you did to me before. That's why."

His fingers twitched, but she did not let go. Several moments of silence passed. There was honesty in her voice. Truth. Sincerity. She was not lying. And that fact was disturbing.

He finally said stiffly, "Perhaps we should return now. It is late."

She did not argue and fell into step beside him, still continuing to hold his hand. Her skin was warm, her fingertips gently brushing his knuckles. He could sense she was thinking, which unnerved him further.

After two minutes, she said, "That's why I keep asking you to stay."

His hand twitched again, but she held tight, and he could sense her desire to control this situation, to be the one speaking and to be understood. He desperately wished to know what she was thinking, what she would say, but somehow he did not want to, either.

"I always want you to stay," she said, looking up at him. He stared ahead, his jaw tight, knowing she was watching him and unable to return her gaze. When she continued to watch him, however, he at last glanced down and said quietly, guardedly:

"Pity can only get you so far, beautiful Christine."

"You know it's not pity, Erik," she said. "You know it."

His heart thudded against his chest again, and he quickly looked straight ahead. She continued to watch him, and he could feel his shoulders tighten again. He resisted the urge to look at her again, and he sensed a breathless hush in the air around them, in the space between them. Something was waiting there.

Christine stepped in front of him, holding his hand, forcing him to stop and look down at her, to meet her gaze.

"You know I love you," she said.

Every organ in his body seemed to shut down simultaneously. Air did not enter his lungs. His heart was no longer beating. His brain ceased to function. And her lovely face was swimming before his eyes, his vision blurring slightly as the words lingered around them. The words. *Those words*.

You know I love you. No. No, he did not know that. He had never known that. And he would never know that, because it was not true. It never could be true. No matter how insane his dreaming had gone, how twisted his ideas had become, he had never actually dared to believe that this would happen. He was still unsure whether or not she was tolerating him in her presence or if she was simply waiting for the moment to order him away. But this...this...

She was looking up at him earnestly, her clear eyes searching him, hopeful, waiting. He waited for her to take the words back, and she did not. Her hands were still grasping his. He could feel her squeezing his fingers gently, and he closed his eyes briefly.

He opened them and then said mechanically, "It is late. We should return now."

Her expression clouded in confusion. "What?"

"It is late. It has grown late in the evening. You should sleep."

She did not argue and instead fell into step, dropping his hand. The skin cooled quickly, and his hand felt empty, bereft. Silence accompanied them as they walked. The sounds around them felt muted as well. He could no longer hear the stream or the distant sounds from the highway, and there were no fairytale furry friends of hers appearing, either. There was nothing but the night air and the reality of this situation. He could sense her glancing up at him repeatedly, but he did not look down.

The horrid *petit diable* meowed happily and rubbed itself against his pant leg as soon as he walked in. He ignored it, narrowing his eyes slightly as she turned the light on, wishing she had left it off.

"Erik?" she said softly, stepping close to him again. She reached over and gently took hold of his fingers once again, saying, "Are you okay?"

He blinked and looked down at her. "It is late," he repeated. "You should sleep."

"I'm not tired." She smiled, but he was unyielding.

"It is late. Sleep. You need to sleep."

Her smile fell, and she dropped his hand again. "Fine."

Good. *Good*. He needed time to himself, time where she would not touch him and look at him with beautiful blue eyes, time where she would not tell him insane things that made no sense.

Within ten minutes, the lights were off, and she had retreated to the sofa, lying down without a word to him. She was ignoring him now. He was not unaccustomed to this treatment. She had employed it on him before when she had been upset with him, though this time he did not know why. He was not trapping her here anymore. If anything, *he* was the one trapped in this miserable little apartment. If she would say one word, one word to release him, he would leave, no matter how badly it would hurt. But she held him here with her laughter and her smiles, her glances, her blushes, her voice and sweet words. She held more power over him than anyone ever had, and he wished he could despise her for it, but he seemed to love her all the more. He could still feel that same adoration that had crept over him as he had sat and watched her videos for hours on end, straining to fall through the screen and simply be in her presence. Those moments seemed a lifetime away, now.

The events of the past year came sweeping back; the things he had done, the things he had said, the lies he had told to her and to himself, the fantasies and half-realized dreams. He had meant to do right by her. He had let her go, wishing for her happiness, genuinely wishing that she marry that boy and be happy. What did it matter if he were miserable? As long as she was happy, it would give him enough solace to stay away from her. And he had believed, for nearly a year, that she had been married and was living in newlywed bliss. Then the truth. About everything. Nadir, Madeleine, de Rege...her escapade around the globe, prying information from people he had never wanted her to know. All for what? For...love?

Did he let himself believe that?

But if it was not true, why would she say that to him? She was not a liar by nature. He knew this. She had lied to him out of necessity before, when he had given her no other option but to lie. But she was sweet, good-natured, kind. Everything he was not. Everything he wanted her to be.

There was a rustling sound from across the room and then a whispered, "Erik?"

He ignored it, hoping she would go to sleep. But then there was a slight creak from the sofa, and through the dimness he could see her standing, slim and radiant in the night. He sat up quickly as she approached the bed, watching her intently.

"Christine? Are you unwell?" he asked at last. "Do your fingers hurt?" She shook her head and sat down on the bed by his legs. There was a long pause. "Are you thirsty?" he pressed. "Would you like water?"

"No," she said quietly.

"Is that cat bothering you?"

She laughed softly. "No."

"It's the sofa, is it not? It is hurting your back. Here—sleep here." He made to slide out of the bed, but she leaned over and put a hand on his thigh, holding him in place with a slight pressure.

"No," she said again. "Just...stay. Please."

Tense silence filled the air, and he then said, his voice hard, "What are you doing?"

"Sitting here," she said, pulling her legs from the floor and tucking them underneath herself. He was in bed with a woman, and he immediately attempted to leave but was stopped when she once again grabbed onto his hand.

"Why do you keep running away from me?" she said, sad humor infused in her voice. "Are you afraid of me?"

He answered honestly. "Yes."

"What?" She shifted even closer. He could feel her knee pressing against his leg. "Why?"

He did not answer, staring at her slender hands still wrapped around his. Christine then said, "Is it...because of what I said earlier? Do you think that's not true? Are you afraid I was lying?"

"I know you were not," he said shortly. "That is why you are terrifying."

"You're afraid of me because I love you? Why?"

"Because you are insane to do so!" he snapped. "Wouldn't anyone be afraid of a madwoman? Oh, yes," he continued, the volume of his voice growing. He pulled his hand away from hers and stood from the bed at last, taking a few short steps away, gesticulating as he spoke, insane himself and unable to stop. "Yes. I have done it. I have driven you completely insane. What other explanation is there? Why else would you be sitting there, staring up at me so? Why else would she allow a monster to sleep in her bed? To share her table? To be in her presence?"

Her expression told him clearly that his words were hurting her, but he needed the answers. If she said nothing else to him, if she ordered him to leave, her words would haunt him into his grave. He would find no rest without knowing.

"Why do you do this?" she then said. "Why are you doing this, Erik? Will you just stop? This—this sarcasm and...bitterness. Being mean to me because you're too scared to open up. Trying to trick me by twisting my words. Confusing me because you know I'm not as smart as you. I'm trying to actually talk to you. This isn't just about you, you know! I told you that I love you, and you—!"

"Why would you say that?" he suddenly asked, his voice loud and hoarse. He turned to stare down at her, hysteria creeping into his voice. He had never felt so close to a breakdown. Nothing had terrified him as much as the girl sitting there on the bed, squinting up at him in confusion in the semi-darkness. An abusive mother, Kurdish rebel soldiers, the Italian mafia, hitmen and law enforcement and entire governments...Nothing had ever terrified him as much as this moment. "Why? Why?"

"Why did I say I love you?" she said. "Or why do I love you?" She shifted to the edge of the bed, closer to him, and he nearly recoiled. But she continued, "Well—a lot of reasons...You helped me find my music again. I'll always love you for that. You're smart. Funny. A genius. You talk to me like...like no one else. You make me feel important. When you're not so...wrapped up in yourself, I feel like you genuinely listen to me."

"But I should not—you *cannot*—" He was becoming hysteric, he knew. A horrific vision swam in front of his eyes; a replayed scene from his childhood, except *he* was his own father, now, and Christine was young, beautiful, enticing...If he allowed this to happen, if he continued to follow her, where would she lead him? If the path turned into the one his mother and father had taken, *he* would kill himself. He would, just as Henri had done. *He* would follow Henri into the only outcome of this grotesque scenario. Had he ever stood a chance against his own genetic makeup?

A brush of skin. He looked to see that she was holding his hand again, gazing up at him, her eyes earnest, her expression serene, calm, serious, and radiant.

"It's all right," she said. "I'm here, Erik. And I love you. I do. I love you."

He felt air leave his body in a shuddering, harsh breath. There was truth in her gaze. There was love.

Suddenly, he fell to his knees in front of her, and his mask was off, and he buried his horrible face into her lap, sobbing, the restrained emotions flooding him at last. How many times had he fantasized that she would say those exact words? He had envisioned how she would look, the inflection of her perfect voice, how she would touch his repulsive skin without disgust. He had gotten a glimpse of his absurd dream that night last summer. Her lips had been everything. But *this* was not what he had dreamed would happen. He had not envisioned himself sobbing at her feet like an infant.

"Erik, please," she then whispered. One of her soft hands came to rest on his shoulder. "Don't cry. I just—please. I love you. Is that okay? Please don't cry. Please."

He clutched at her nightgown, pressing it against his hideous face, her scent intoxicating. He could get drunk from it.

She ran her hand over his hair then, and he shuddered under her touch, wondering if she would still be there if he were to open his eyes.

"It is a dream," he whispered into her legs. "It is a dream. That is all. But she is softer than I ever dreamt. She smells sweeter than I ever imagined. How?"

"It's not a dream," Christine said, still running her fingers through his hair.

"No," he said. "No, you are right. That *petit diable* would not be in any fantasy of mine." He could hear it purring near them, no doubt waiting for a chance to irritate Christine. "I hate that wretched cat," he said, hearing his voice cracking slightly, and Christine laughed, the sound beautiful.

"You don't have to stay on the floor," she then said. "You should come up here, with me. Kneeling on the floor all night kills your knees. I would know."

He could feel her thigh underneath his lips. The physical feel of her skin underneath the fabric, the softness of her nightgown, the slight dampness from his tears, one hand in his hair and the other on his shoulder...It was all so different and so much better than he had ever fantasized. "Perhaps it is better than a dream," he whispered.

"Erik? Come up here, on the bed." She grabbed his arms and gave a slight pull. "You shouldn't be on the floor like that." With another pull, he came, but he could not yet see her face, could not yet be her equal and look into her eyes, and so he pressed his face into her stomach, wrapping his arms around her waist, straining to be near and yet not ready for everything at once.

She lay back on the bed, a hand still in his hair, and a soft, unavoidable moan reverberated in his throat as her fingertips brushed his scalp and the back of his neck.

"How is this real?" he said. She did not answer, but he did not feel that she needed to.

The mattress was soft and the room was quiet. *Petit diable* could be heard purring on the sofa, perhaps giving up for now, and *he* tightened his arms around her. He would not crush her, but he could not let her go. Not now. Not when he could feel the softness of her stomach, the warmth of her skin through the nightgown. Nothing could ever come close to this.

He could sense her falling asleep sometime later, and he felt her gentle breathing, the rise and fall of her stomach underneath his cheek. It made him want to weep all over again. He wished to remain this way forever. It would have been an idyllic way to die; in her bed, near her, her softness around him.

Of course, just as it had been with everything in his life, the blissful scene was interrupted. The stupid cat trotted over and jumped onto the bed, and he sat up, glaring. It meowed loudly, watching him with luminescent eyes, perhaps looking for some kind of affection. Instead he hissed at it, and it leapt off the bed and ran to the corner, where it flicked its tail at him in annoyance. He could not help but wonder yet again how long Christine would insist on keeping it. He was positive that there was a plentiful amount of old widows who were in need of some sort of feline companionship. Perhaps if Christine knew the cat would be cared for instead of given back to some sort of shelter, she would agree.

He looked at her, her expression peaceful, her breathing quiet and steady. He had seen her sleep before, yet in the faint light of the apartment, sleeping in *her* bed, with *him* beside her, she had never looked as lovely as she did at that moment.

Carefully, so as not to wake her, he lay down beside her on his back, staring at the ceiling. Thoughts crept into his brain, torturous images of her waking and shrieking at the sight of him, ordering him out of her apartment, screaming that she never wished to see him again. He swallowed and resisted the urge to slink out of the bed. If this was to be his last moment of peace, he would take it. He was selfish. A greedy monster. So he would have these last few hours.

But she woke sometime later when it was still dark outside, rubbing her eyes and giving a little grunt of displeasure. He could not move and felt her shifting next to him, sensed her eyes opening and adjusting to the darkness in the apartment. And then looking at him. He tensed slightly, bracing himself, ready to leave, but instead she moved closer to him. Closer. And draped an arm around his chest. She leaned her cheek against his shoulder. Several long, silent moments passed. She felt divine. He wondered if he was hallucinating. So he tried to speak, to break any fantasy that was playing tricks on his brain.

"The cat tried to get onto the bed," he said hoarsely. "I did not let it on the bed."

She giggled. "No cats in our bed, then, if that's what you want. Poor kitty."

He waited, wondering if she would correct herself or retract her words. She didn't, and so he ventured quietly, his heart threatening to beat its way out of his rib cage, "*Our* bed?"

"Hmm?" She moved even closer to him, resting her chin on his chest to see his face, and he resisted the urge to hide it. "Yeah, *our* bed. People who are in love usually share a bed." She gave a little simpering look, something he had never seen from her before and somehow found incredibly attractive. "Unless you want me to go back to the couch?"

"No!" He gripped her, knowing it was too tight by her little gasp and furrowed brows, and he attempted to loosen his hold just slightly. "No, you must stay here. Beside me. Forever."

She blushed. Smiled. "All right. Forever." She traced a button on his shirt. "Have you slept at all? Are you tired?"

"I do not think I shall ever sleep again," he said. "I will simply lie awake, staring at you."

"You could play with the cat," she teased.

"I will begin by whittling down its nine lives."

"Erik!"

His lips twitched slightly, and then he saw her lean up. And as she kissed him, he did not know how or why he ever deserved it. He deserved nothing from her. But she kissed him again, and she was just as he remembered. Warm, soft, breathtaking. *He* had no other experience, had no sort of skill set with this, and so he let her teach him. He had never wanted to learn something so badly in his life.

"I have changed my mind," he whispered as she drew back slightly to breathe. "It is a dream."

She laughed, and then he shifted closer and kissed her again.

Time slipped by. He did not want those hours to ever end, the exchanging of soft words and even softer kisses, her smiles and blushes delighting him. There was one moment of alarm sometime into this; he felt her small hand slip under his shirt, her fingertips brushing his wasted stomach, and he seized her wrist, torn between utter panic and a part of his brain that told him to let her continue touching him.

"I'm sorry," she said instantly, pulling her hand away from his grip and stroking his hair. "I'm sorry. I won't. We have time, Erik. We have so much time. Don't worry. It's okay." And she kissed him until the panic receded and there was nothing but love.

The pale rays of the sunrise eventually crept into the room, and she was curled against him again, the taste and feel of her lips and tongue still fresh and tantalizing.

"It seems there was not much sleep for either of us tonight," he said.

"I guess we'll need a long morning nap," she said, looking over to the window.

"Mm. And no cat on the bed."

"Right. No *Petit diable* allowed."

He laughed quietly. "We must work on your French."

She smiled, blushed, and leaned against him. "Erik?" she murmured after a few moments.

"Yes?"

She looked up at him. "Will you sing for me sometime today? It's been so long...I miss the music so much."

"Yes. Yes, I will sing. And you will sing, and we will have our music again. We must simply find somewhere to go that offers more privacy. Your little cardboard box does not have the best sound-proofing, I'm afraid."

"We can go anywhere." She smiled widely, excitement in her eyes. "We can go anywhere, Erik! We can do anything. We'll go wherever you want! I'll go anywhere with you. Back to New York, or—or London, or Vienna, or Chicago or—anywhere!"

Her cheeks were warm against his hands, and he kissed her again. "You are divine," he then said, pressing his lips to her forehead. "We will go wherever you wish—even if it is a mere whim. I will take you anywhere, and you will rule the world with your voice."

She laughed then, though he did not know why. He was serious. But he did enjoy the sound and the way her nose scrunched slightly.

"What do you think Dr. Khan will do when he finds out?" she said.

"If we are lucky, he will have a heart attack and therefore never bother us again. And you must stop calling him doctor. It inflates his already-large ego."

"Oh, yeah, like you're the one to talk about egos." She gave a little excitable gasp. "We could surprise him with a visit, though! I'll bet he'd love that. And he said London is better in the summertime. There were some things I didn't get to see when I was there last, and we could see them together!"

She continued to prattle on like this, describing the various countries they would visit, the things they would see, the music she would learn and perform, the future...*Their* future. Certain words made his heart skip several beats, words like 'marriage' and 'wedding.' But she continued, telling him plans for finishing her education, for furthering her career, for starting *his* music career. And he simply listened, unable to interrupt or contradict her, not when she was so radiant and resplendent in the morning light. She talked until the room was brightly lit and she was in his arms, her head on his chest and her words becoming slurred with exhaustion. Murmured and half-formed sentences eventually faded, and she slept.

He held her.

He held her. Christine Daae was in his arms at last, and he had not forced her there, and he had not threatened. She slept in a bed with him, peaceful. She had kissed him until he had been dizzy and dull. She had spoken of a future with him—a future in which they were together. With her there beside him, her curls brushing against his exposed skin and her scent soothing, he knew he would never let her be harmed again. He would not allow figures from his past to hurt her in any way. He would spend the rest of his life atoning for the ones that had, would do whatever it took to ensure that she was happy, successful, and content. He would not fail her.

Christine gave a little murmur, nuzzling closer to him, and he gently brushed a few curls from off of her cheek. No words from any poet could describe the feeling. But perhaps there was no need to. Perhaps he merely needed to feel. To experience. To love this odd, beautiful, gifted, brave, compassionate girl who slept beside him. And when she woke, the world would wake with her, and there would be truth at last.

Fin

And that's all! Thank you all so much for the reviews, favorites, and follows. A special thanks to everyone who took the time to review regularly and provide constructive and insightful feedback. I hope you enjoyed this final chapter. This story was so much fun to write. Thank you again so much, and let me know what you think of this last chapter!